

The 21st Century Guitar

Volume 1 *Proceedings of The 21st Century
Guitar Conference 2019 & 2021*

Article 17

5-8-2023

Marc Ribot's Exercises in Futility

Francesca Naibo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/twentyfirst-century-guitar>



Part of the [Music Performance Commons](#), and the [Music Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Naibo, F. (2023). Marc Ribot's Exercises in Futility. In R. Torres, A. Brandon, & J. Noble (Eds.), *Proceedings of The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2019 & 2021* (pp. 253-270). <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/twentyfirst-century-guitar/vol1/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 21st Century Guitar at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The 21st Century Guitar by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Marc Ribot's Exercises in Futility

Abstract

Marc Ribot (*1954), one of the most influential guitarists of the worldwide avant-garde scene, started his musical life taking classical guitar classes with the Haitian teacher Frantz Casseus, turning then to electric guitar. After decades spent mainly on electric instruments, Ribot composed and recorded Exercises in Futility, his own series of etudes for solo guitar. The collection of pieces presents fifteen compositions that are intended to be studies for classical guitarists. Between 2015 and 2020 Ribot and I collaborated to create the scores of this collection of studies, soon to be published. The purpose of this paper is to present the work, explain the structure of the pieces, illustrate the process of meticulous analysis of the manuscripts and recordings and how the score was created. Our approach took into account that for Ribot the most important aspect remains making music and having fun with it – how could the Exercises ever be futile if we consider them too seriously?

Keywords

guitar exercises, transcription, improvisation. etude

Cover Page Footnote

Lecture-recital given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021.

Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility*¹

Francesca Naibo

Independent researcher, Italy

Marc Ribot (*1954), one of the most influential guitarists of the worldwide avant-garde scene, started his musical life taking classical guitar classes with the Haitian teacher Frantz Casseus, turning then to electric guitar. After decades spent mainly on electric instruments, Ribot composed and recorded *Exercises in Futility*, his own series of etudes for solo guitar. The collection of pieces presents fifteen compositions that are intended to be studies for classical guitarists. Between 2015 and 2020 Ribot and I collaborated to create the scores of this collection of studies, soon to be published. The purpose of this paper is to present the work, explain the structure of the pieces, illustrate the process of meticulous analysis of the manuscripts and recordings and how the score was created. Our approach took into account that for Ribot the most important aspect remains making music and having fun with it – how could the *Exercises* ever be futile if we consider them too seriously?

Exercises in Futility is an important work for classical guitar composed between 2003 and 2008 by Marc Ribot. Currently available only on CD, which was recorded in 2008 and performed by himself, the work is a collection of pieces that explores and expands the sonic possibilities of the instrument. Even if all the pieces are intended as setups for improvisations, the collection is rather heterogeneous, since many studies present real composed parts, other just indications about chords, other just melodies. Unlike traditional studies, these musical pages do not mean to teach a specific technique or a musical feature. Callum McKenzie (2008, para. 2) defined this work Marc Ribot's sort of "Mean-Tempered Guitar." Ribot does not use preparation on the instrument, but explores the huge amount of sounds that his guitar can produce. The listener can experience "impressionistic droplets with parallel pick noise, hopscotch plucking, minimalist elements alternated to complex chording, fluid solo accelerations splattering melody, scratching" (Jarnow, 2008) and beating.

Pending a publication

Many guitarists have recently shown interest in consulting the score. After working together in its edition, Marc Ribot and I started together searching for a publisher and hoped to conclude the process in a short time. Unfortunately, the official publication has not occurred yet.² Nevertheless, Ribot's concept, musical ideas and instrumental development will find space in this paper and in the future publication for a deep analysis and comprehension. *Exercises in Futility* is a work written by a guitarist and is addressed to guitarists. It goes beyond the limits of genres, defining a new idea of classical guitar and repertoire. Because of its origin, aim, structure and meaning, this work can be considered one of the most influential 21st century composition for classical guitar.

¹ Lecture-recital given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021.

² At the present time we are still working on this target. For this reason we are not able to include all the scores of the pieces for the analysis of the work, but thanks to the kind permission of the composer the paper ends with a case study that is useful to better understand the process of transcription and edition of the etudes.

About the composer

A prolific career

Marc Ribot was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1954 and is for sure one of the most influential guitarists of the worldwide avant-garde scene (a recent photograph of Ribot can be found in Fig. 1). As a teen he studied classical guitar with Frantz Casseus, Haitian guitarist and composer,³ at the same time he played guitar in various garage bands (Bio, n.d.). Rolling Stone remarks that “guitarist Marc Ribot helped Tom Waits refine a new, weird Americana on 1985’s *Rain Dogs*, and since then he’s become the go-to guitar guy for all kinds of roots-music adventurers: Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, Elvis Costello, John Mellencamp” (Hermes, 2010, para. 3). Additional prominent collaborations encompass Diana Krall, Marianne Faithfull, Arto Lindsay, Caetano Veloso, Laurie Anderson, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Jeff Bridges and many others. Ribot regularly works with John Zorn, the well-known American composer (depicted along Zorn in Fig. 2), who had surely a strong influence on the guitarist’s artistic development. Ribot boasts a copious discography (over 20 albums under his own name over a 40-year career [Discography, n.d.]) and has been exploring many different musical worlds from Albert Ayler’s jazz with his group *Spiritual Unity* (Pi Recordings), to Cuban music under *Marc Ribot Y Los Cubanos Postizos*. He currently leads an avant power/post-rock trio called *Marc Ribot’s Ceramic Dog*, that continues the activity he had started back in his earlier experimental no-wave/punk/noise groups. Ribot recorded different solo albums: *Marc Ribot Plays The Complete Works of Frantz Casseus* (1993-2021 remastered), *John Zorn’s The Book of Heads* (1995), *Don’t Blame Me* (1995), *Saints* (2001), *Exercises in Futility* (2008), *Silent Movies* (2010).⁴

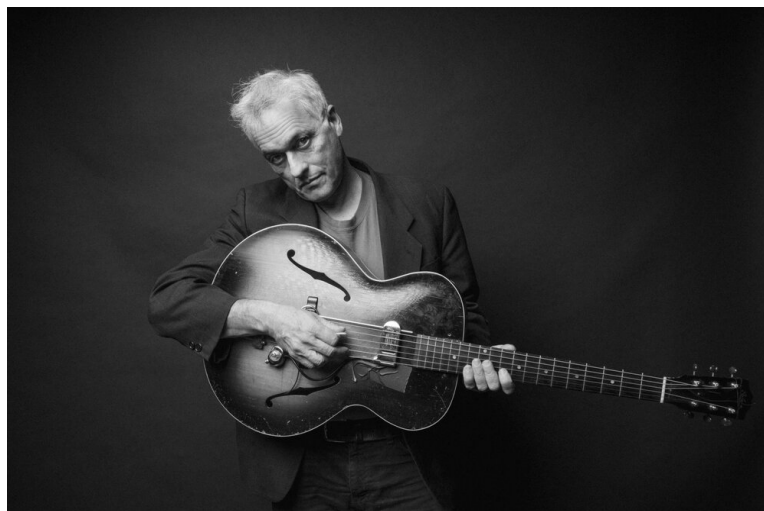


Figure 1 Marc Ribot. Retrieved from <https://www.marcribot.com/bio>. Copyright 2019 by Ebru Yildiz. Reprinted with permission.

³ See Ribot (2003) for a sincere and detailed narration of Casseus’s life and his relationship with his pupil.

⁴ Ribot’s complete discography is available at <https://www.marcribot.com/discography>



Figure 2 Bar Kokhba at Newport Jazz Festival 2014 with Marc Ribot, John Zorn, Cyro Baptista. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/weeklydig/14634609110>. Copyright 2014 by Tim Bugbee. Reprinted with permission.

Solo milestones

The alternation of styles in such an influential solo discography shows the many facets of Ribot's artistic activity. The first two releases stand out particularly, because they were published within three years and were dedicated to the work of two diametrically different composers: Casseus and Zorn. The former (depicted along with Ribot in Fig. 3) "composed a distinctly Haitian classical guitar music, to fuse the European classical tradition with Haitian folk elements as Heitor Villa-Lobos had done with his native Brazil's and as Béla Bartók had done with Hungarian folk songs" (Ribot, 2003, para. 4); instead, Zorn wrote avant-garde, extreme and challenging pieces. Ribot also had a close, long-lasting relationship and collaboration with both composers.⁵ It is relevant noticing that he decided to use his classical guitar exclusively in Casseus's album and in his *Exercises in Futility*. Moreover, these two records are separated by fifteen years.



Figure 3 Marc Ribot and Frantz Casseus in 1987. Retrieved from <https://www.marcribot.com/frantz-casseus>. Copyright 1987 by Harriet Ribot. Reprinted with permission.

⁵ The relationship with Casseus was so intense, that Ribot not only took care of preserving his mentor's music through a complete publication of his scores, but also founded the Frantz Casseus Young Guitarists Program in Port-Au-Prince (Frantz Casseus, n.d.).

Classical guitar marks

Although most of Ribot's activity has been conducted on the electric guitar, his very first three years on the instrument were on the classical guitar and this clearly left a mark on his technique: he stated that it was only at the beginning of his 20s that he started to use the pick (Dawson & Ribot, 2016). His background on the classical guitar is also easily recognizable observing his posture during his performances on classical and acoustic guitar. He usually lays the instrument on his left leg, his left foot is placed on a footstool, his left thumb always stays behind the neck, he uses his nails while playing arpeggios, as can be verified in recent concert footage (Jarasum Jazz Festival, 2018), as well as in Figure 4. Simultaneously, his practise on the electric guitar and his experiences with loud volumes directed him towards the research of extreme dynamics on the classical guitar, with no concern about producing unpleasant sounds, as again verified in concert footage (Leon, 2013). Thanks to such his broad sonic and musical view, Ribot embodies a modern, chameleonic, open-minded and unique figure of guitarist.



Figure 4 Marc Ribot at Jamboree Jazz Club in 2016. Retrieved from Josep Tomàs' Flickr album *Marc Ribot al Jamboree*.⁶ Copyright 2016 by Josep Tomàs. Reprinted with permission.

About *Exercises in Futility*

Zorn's influence

Exercises in Futility, one of the most important solo works by Ribot, were published in 2008 in CD format by Tzadik, the well-known label created and run by John Zorn.⁷ In those years Ribot's activity was feverish and such release of the *Exercises* was no randomness: as a matter of fact Ribot and Zorn had been collaborating for years, especially when the former decided to work on the latter's monumental *The Book of Heads*, a cycle of 35 etudes for solo guitar composed in 1978 and recorded in 1995 again for Tzadik. All

⁶ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thundershead/24592632585/in/photolist-DtaESD-p3KnWX-2hN3m78-pZtVHX-cBe8PY-dWJADb-bjznZt-CUEMsB-D245aL-DtaGn2-2hMYFq2-dWJAfE-gEd4Tf-2g714if-7eVQ1F-bjjoeh-dWJBT5-bjjokT-2nm3J1h-dX7Y3K-2hv5wwZ-cBe8VL-5JBAgj-ad975z-bjjo8c-cBe8Eq-DkU5wn-cBe8BC-2kFnu4b-cBe829-2g714nD-dWjxU3-64ose7-AYGh1-cBe7RL-cBe8SE-ndsTE-a2E7XP-aBo1Mq-dWCXCg-cBe7V3-a2E59X-cBe8oC-dWCUta-dWJydL-a2GWk7-2hMYFuA-adyTki-a2E5Di-JxpqvS>

⁷ For more on Zorn's music see Service, T. (2012, May 21). *A guide to John Zorn's Music*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/may/21/contemporary-composers-guide-john-zorn>

the pieces, coming in handwritten scores, are intended as heads, which in jazz are themes, beginnings or starting ideas for improvisations – Figure 5 shows an excerpt of one of these etudes. Zorn (1978) drew many different graphical symbols and asked for innovative, extreme and demanding gestures and sounds, hence it is clear that all etudes require a very high technique, outstanding skills and control on the instrument. The composer wants the guitarist to use a broad palette of sounds, using preparations, objects and extended techniques (*John Zorn: The Book of Heads*, n.d.).

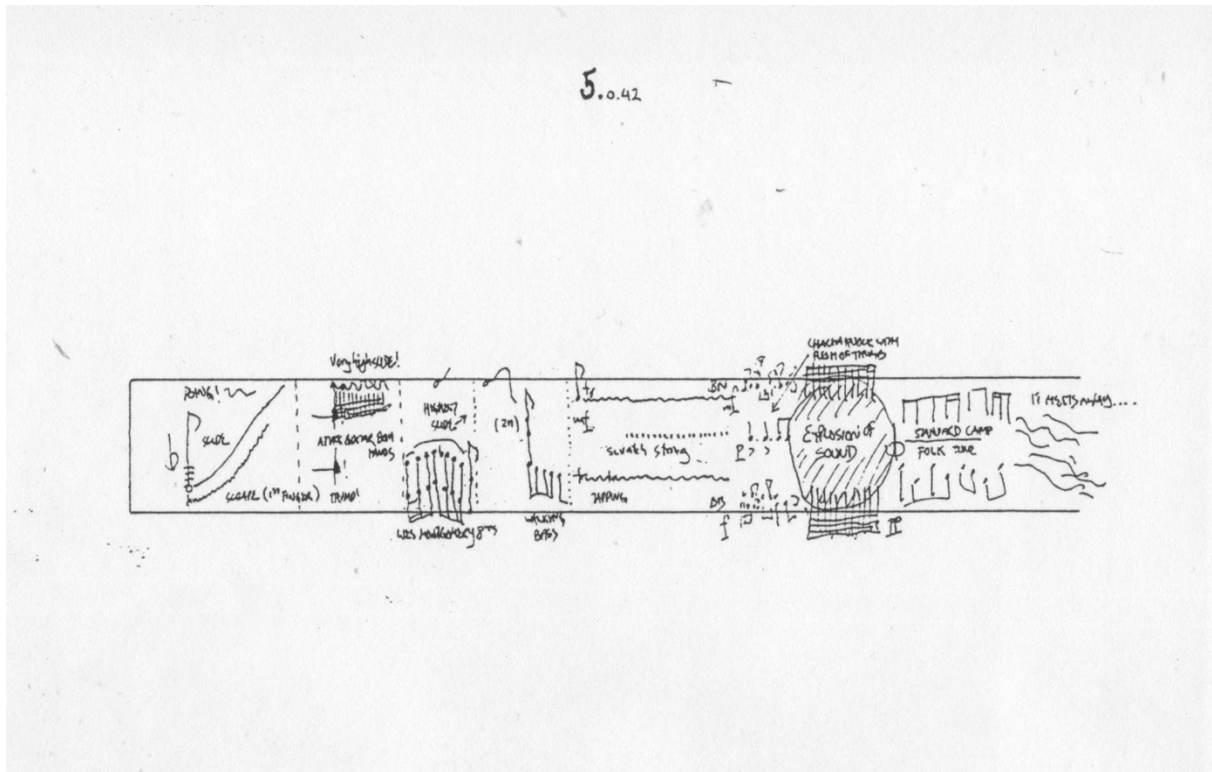


Figure 5 Excerpt from John Zorn's *The Book of Heads*. Reprinted with permission from *The Book of Heads* (p. 8) by J. Zorn, 1978, Hips Road Edition. Copyright 1978 by John Zorn.

In the documentary *La corde perdue* Ribot speaks of the peculiarity of Zorn's approach to the guitar, stating:

John Zorn is a friend of mine and we've worked together since about 1989 or 1990. He's a real composer. When he wrote for guitar he knew more about extended techniques for guitar than I did. He wrote a lot of things that were impossible to do that doesn't seem to bother him. He does that intentionally too. (Prosaic, 2007, 37:36-38:04)

3.2 The meaning of composition – looking for a new style?

Not long after the release of *The Book of Heads* Ribot decided to work on his own solo music, very probably because this work had a strong influence over his artistic development. Investigating Ribot's compositional philosophy reveals a denial of research for new styles and elements at all costs and a deep listening to his need of writing. During an interview with Music Hunter Blog (2014) he affirmed:

How can you write new music when basically nothing is new? I don't have the ambition to create something new. I think that creating, writing music is a process and I think that new things emerge very slowly in fact, and only in response to a certain need, not only my need but the need of a lot of

people. [...] I think that new music or interesting new music, new music people care about doesn't emerge just because someone has decided for purely intellectual reasons they're going to create something new today. I try to play what I need, what I need to play, and write what I need to write, and hope that if I need it, other people need it too, and beyond that that's it. New music often arises out of disgust with old music. You get bored as hell of what you're playing and so you write something different. (Music Hunter Blog, 2014, 5:03-6:21)

As we will analyze later, his *Exercises* contain many references, quotes, allusions and this is something typical of Ribot's poetics. He doesn't feel the need of being constantly original and supports the importance of copying, imitating, being wrong, as he explained during another interview:

I have a very unheroic idea of how things move forward. [...] I'm not in favour of this idea of someone sitting in a room saying "I'm going to create a style", like a corporation trying to create a brand. Say: "Yes, I'm going to create a style that will be my property". The way it works in practice is people try to steal things, they try to imitate what they like, what moves them, and in fact what's new happens when they make mistakes. The good thing is: the strong artist will imitate but do it wrong. And their wrongness is their originality. [...] Thievery and mistake is how things move forward, if there is a forward. (Radio Študent, 2011, 9:01-10:10)

A short presentation of the CD is available on Tzadik's website (Fig. 6 depicts the album's cover) and it consists of a concise and sharp description of the musical contents:

Heretical new music for solo guitar composed and performed by the radical maverick Marc Ribot, who has worked with everyone from Elvis Costello, Maryanne Faithfull and Tom Waits to Bill Frisell and Sun Ra. Conceived as impossible etudes and exercises on a variety of finger busting guitar techniques, this astonishing suite will forever change your concept of what the guitar is capable (or not capable) of. Also included are a variety of compositions for solo guitar, making this the definitive collection of Ribot's expressive and virtuosic solo music. Twisted, mangled and tortured, this instrumental tour-de-force is musical sacrilege at its best. (*Marc Ribot: Exercises in Futility*, n.d.)

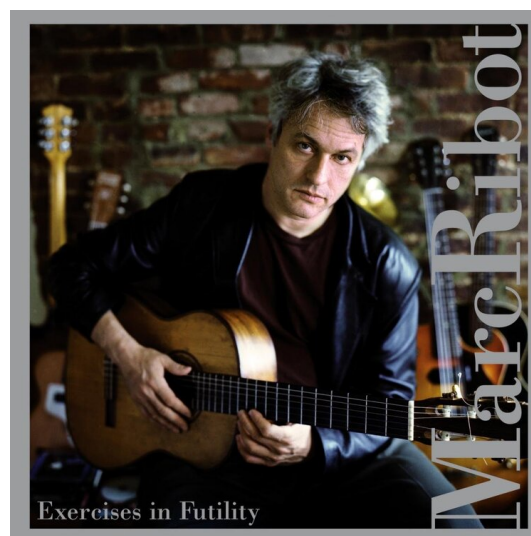


Figure 6 Cover of Marc Ribot's album *Exercises in Futility* (released 2008 by Tzadik). Copyright 2008 by Scott Irvine. Reprinted with permission.

Simple and moronic ideas

It's clear that *Exercises in Futility* was inspired by John Zorn's *The Book of Heads* because of its structure as a collection of studies and because of the difficulty the performer has to face. The above-quoted words "impossible etudes and exercises" (*Marc Ribot: Exercises in Futility*, n.d.) allude to another essential characteristic of Ribot's work: all pieces are intended to be studies for classical guitarists but unlike traditional studies, these musical pages do not mean to teach a specific technique or a musical feature. Their sole intention is to be futile, enjoyable, easy-going, as stresses

Zampino (2008), who recalls:

As [Ribot] described in a 2005 CityPaper interview: "I've been trying to figure out exactly what it is I do and distill it into this book of exercises. The idea of exercises is usually that you stretch your fingers or improve yourself in some way. I've tried to create exercises that leave you absolutely no better off afterwards than before you've done them". (para. 3)

Even the choice of the words for the title is a precise declaration of intents: Collins (n.d.) defines *futility* as "total lack of purpose or usefulness."

When asked whether he took inspiration from any other classical guitar collection of studies, Ribot affirmed that

they were inspired very directly by Leo Brouwer's *Estudios sencillos 1-20*. I just love those pieces and I love Brouwer's composition. But what I was up to with this was: Leo Brouwer in those estudios guessed something about simplicity that I like. [...] I was listening to those and I loved those, and at the same time I was hanging out sometime with a friend of mine, Robert Quine.⁸ [...] Robert and Tom Verlaine⁹ invented the idea that you can solo in punk rock and invented what a punk rock solo was. I understand this is politically incorrect now, but Robert's greatest term of admiration was to call something moronic. What he was looking for in a piece of music or in an artistic idea was not just the simple but the moronic. And it's hard to explain the pleasure that we take in the moronic. I'm not so sure I can explain it exactly, let's just say that's where we feel at home. So, somehow it's unclassical guitar because I wanted it to refer to Leo Brouwer's compositions, but at the same time I wanted to take the idea of simplicity further into the moronic. (personal communication, February 26, 2021)

Such a compositional approach with the classical guitar is quite rare, therefore I asked Ribot whether he expected this collection of studies to bring something new and interesting to the classical repertoire. He replied positively: "The answer to the question is yes. If not these pieces themselves, then a different understanding of what it means to play classical guitar or to compose for classical guitar" (personal communication, February 26, 2021).

Structure of the work

The *Exercises* are the result of working with a single element in its most basic idea. This work consists of 15 pieces (14 etudes and 1 final composition) that do not follow a specific order or progression. The collection is rather heterogeneous, because many studies present real composed parts, other just indications about chords, other only melodies. The whole work presents improvisation sections inside the structure of each piece, the title of which generally alludes to its main characteristic. Below follows a description of each piece.

⁸ American punk-rock guitarist. He collaborated, among others, with Lou Reed and was the original guitarist in Richard Hell & The Voidoids.

⁹ American rock guitarist, frontman of the band Television.

Etude 1 – Five Gestures – is composed of five sections (gestures) that have to be played in the specified order. Each gesture should last one minute, for a total duration of five minutes. The opening and the final section use unpitched sounds and scratches, making this etude one of the most experimental.

Etude 2 – Morton – refers to Morton Feldman's poetics and is an attempt to play with low dynamics. Special features are a 6th string scordatura to C#, generous resonances, glissandos and tremolos.

Etude 3 – Elvis – opens with a specific nervous and fast element that clarifies G minor tonality and ternary tempo. It widely uses arpeggio and contains clear references to Elvis's songs in minor tonality and to rock licks and clichés.

Etude 4 – Bombasto – is named for its sounding bombastic and alternates a cheeky opening element with repeated chords during the first part. In the second, it explores and repeats insistently chords that can be associated to A minor tonality.

Etude 5 – Lame – opens with simple ascending and descending lines, followed by glissandos, repeated notes, rubbing the wood and Ribot's new technical element called "string fucking", which consists in inserting index or middle finger between any two adjacent strings and move rapidly in and out of the sound hole.

Etude 6 – Cowboy – is presented in agogic as "Americana/Anti-Americana" and starts with the main theme (a cowboy-like short melody), that comes again three times with variations in its development.

Etude 7 – Ballad – is a sweet and calm piece, with a two-voice theme followed by a wide arpeggio on a A flat major 7th chord.

Etude 8 – Groove? – has a groovy theme that is alternated with nervous elements built on multiple slurs.

Etude 9 – Morton 2 – follows the basic characteristics of Morton 1, so it has the same scordatura, generous resonances and arpeggios. The key words followed by Ribot are "imitate" and "vary", as indicated in the manuscript, and towards the end the composer offers a light and crystalline part with harmonics.

Etude 10 – Min – refers in its title to minor and minimalist, in fact it's the shortest piece of the collection. Its simple opening element is alternated with short scales, slurs, harmonics, pauses and its dynamic stays generally low.

Etude 11 – Ascending – is an almost entirely composed piece. Its opening line arises and is sometimes interrupted by mighty tremolos.

Etude 12 – Mirror – is composed of ascending and descending lines that are mainly built on perfect 4th intervals. The variations sections use the mirrored version of these lines and elements.

Etude 13 – Wank – refers in its title to the gesture of male masturbation, which is in fact imitated in the long glissando the piece consists of. Its main features are also minor 9th intervals, string fucking (see Etude 5), short melodies, and the so-called whoops, a technique largely used by Zorn in *The Book of Heads*, which consists of loud squeaks produced by sliding a wet finger on the top of the guitar.

Etude 14 – Event on the 10th Avenue – is described by Ribot as a punk-rock piece played on classical guitar. It is a generic piece with a clear ABA structure, where B is a free improvised section.

The last composition is called *The Joy of Repetition* and is a ten-minute-long piece based on repeated chords and harmonies with lack of affect.

Transcription and edition

The reason for two versions

The collaboration between Ribot and I started in 2015, when I decided to dedicate myself to this cycle of studies, because until today there were no available scores of the *Exercises*. Creating an edition of this work was a real challenge: I could only work on manuscripts but mostly I had to use the recordings as evidence of the artistic work I was scrutinizing. However, the most delicate part dealt with the improvisation sections; the question was whether we should write them down or just leave open spaces in the score. I personally found it very interesting to analyze what Ribot realized in his personal versions of the *Exercises*, because scrutinizing improvisations can help deepen a musician's language. In fact, the idea of publishing the scores is also a way to share with other guitarists the process I personally went through and all the relevant music material that came out of the transcription. So, I presented to the composer two versions of every piece: the real score (just with the simple moronic idea and brief indications for improvisations) and the transcription of his performance. In this regard, his comment gave a precise direction to our work:

In the process of going over the scores, really because you Francesca notated and transcribed the improvisations, in a number of cases I kind of decided that I like the improvisations and in several cases we are publishing the transcriptions of the improvisations, not just the original moronic idea. I figured if Giacinto Scelsi can do it, why not me? (personal communication, February 26, 2021)

The transcriptions that arouse such enthusiasm in the composer are *Morton*, *Cowboy*, *Morton 2*, *Mirror* and *Wank*. Ribot decided that these pieces would include the notation of the improvisation sections even in their real scores.

For all the reasons above mentioned we are going to publish both versions (the real score and Ribot's transcribed performance), making clear though that the guitarist version is generally not to be intended and taken for the only possibility, because the idea at the base of this collection of studies is to provide a setup for improvisations. We are aware of the risk that at least some guitarists (more likely from classical music) will treat these published transcriptions as scores that have to be learned with precision and strictness. Such approach could eliminate the nature of this work, but Ribot showed no concern about this possibility. In our conversations he showed an attitude that is far from the egocentricity that may be expectable from the figure of the composer. He even affirmed that if people don't find his choices in working with the concepts and motifs of the heads of any interest, they should not consider them and consult directly the real score. Another approach to this duality of scores could be in the didactic field. Firstly, it shows an inverted in-depth analysis of the musical work: from the recordings to the written music. Usually it happens in the opposite way, starting from the study on paper and widening the knowledge of the piece with eminent performers' recordings. Secondly, the two versions could help guitar students learn renowned musicians' expressive tools and progressively build their own personal taste for improvisation.

A case study: *Five Gestures*

Real score

Five Gestures is the opening piece of the cycle and could be read as a presentation of the instrument.¹⁰ In fact, the guitarist does five different actions on the instrument, which have to be played in the written order: a mixture of tremolo and scratching, a fretted musical line, a B flat section, a slurs sequence and a final high tremolo part. The manuscript, depicted in Figure 7, is concise and complete, so editing the score was not complicated, and the result is a very short and essential real score.

Figure 8 presents the complete edition of this etude's real score. In Figures 9 to 13 it is possible to find Ribot's original indications and our final version for each section (as well as the sections' transcriptions). This allows to highlight the common expressions and graphic signs, but also what was added to help the reader fully understand the gestures.

Transcriptions

Contrary to the real score, the transcription of Ribot's performance of this etude is very detailed. This contrast is a useful tool for anyone who wants to discover this music and potentially perform it. Transcribing the recording was challenging and I decided to use a graphical notation for the opening and final gestures, because they do not contain pitched sounds and tempo is fluctuating. For both sections I represented the music through graphics that respect the proportions of durations and pitch variations. The transcriptions of each section can be found in Figures 9 to 13 along with their manuscript and edited versions. The transcription of section 1 (in Fig. 9) presents two undulating lines: the upper one represents the muted arpeggio and the one below shows how the scratch of the left thumb moves. The transcription of section 2 (in Fig. 10) shows the "reverse swing composition" that Ribot improvised during the recording. The sonic material consists of half-muted fretted notes, as indicated in the real score. Section 3 is based on a slow melody in B flat minor major 7th tonality and its transcription (in Fig. 11) shows how Ribot interpreted it: long chords, a few staccato elements, a short melody, a lot of space. Section 4 contrasts with the previous section: it is fast and random, using pull-off with open strings, as shows its transcription in Figure 12. The last section consists of a high muted tremolo on the 1st string with pitch variations (see Fig. 13) and, like the transcription of the opening section of the piece, is a graphically proportioned representation of the sounds.

¹⁰Since there are no videos of live performances by Ribot, I propose my own version performed in 2016: Naibo, F. (2016, July 11). *Marc Ribot – Exercises in Futility. Etude #1: Five Gestures* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlKWsdv6tR8&list=PLPlf1_LcYafMjlQm5Q-jNq1wj41LBQNw5&index=4. Other two pieces are available: Naibo, F. (2016, July 12). *Marc Ribot – Exercises in Futility. Etude #4: Bombasto* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mr_G9bbJ3hl&list=PLPlf1_LcYafMjlQm5Q-jNq1wj41LBQNw5&index=3; Naibo, F. (2016, July 16). *Marc Ribot – Exercises in Futility. Etude #7: Ballad* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSAPdQvnA4s&list=PLPlf1_LcYafMjlQm5Q-jNq1wj41LBQNw5&index=4

#7

5 section Tremolo

① ^{minute} ~~min~~  etc

② ^{isolated} ^{gestures} ^{limited} ^{reverse} ^{swing}
all fretted no open string  on ④ ⑤ ⑥ string

③ ^{using with maj chords beginning on}
Slow melody in Bb min maj7 

④  fast & random

⑤ High tremolo  vary pitch

Figure 7 Manuscript of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility*. Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.

ETUDE #1 - FIVE GESTURES

Marc Ribot

Each gesture should last one minute,
for a total duration of five minutes.
Play the sections in the specified order.

1



moving a parallel chord structure up and
down the neck on 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th string

scratch thumb l.h. 

2

improvise a reverse swing composition
using fretted elements, half muted



3

slow melody in B \flat min m7 tonality

4

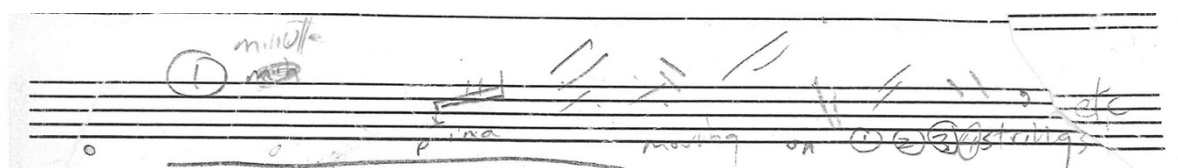
fast and random, pull-off with open strings

5

high (muted) tremolo on 1st string, pitch variations

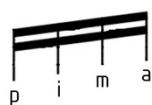


Figure 8 Real score of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility*. Reprinted with permission from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot, Eds.), in press. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.



1

muted



moving a parallel chord structure up and down the neck on 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th string

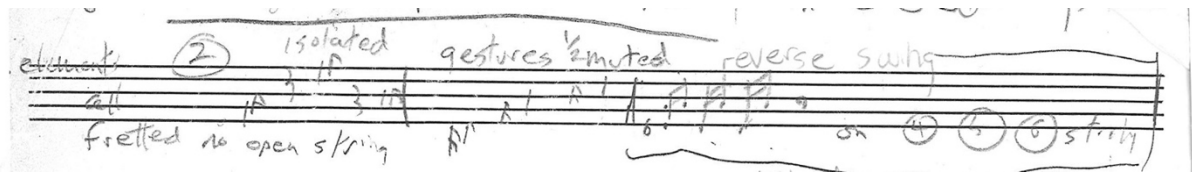
scratch thumb l.h.



1



Figure 9 Section 1 of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility* in the score's manuscript (above) and edited version (in the middle), and transcribed by the author (below). Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive and from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot. Eds.), in press.
Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.



2

improvise a reverse swing composition using fretted elements, half muted



2



Figure 10 Section 2 of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility* in the score's manuscript (above) and edited version (in the middle), and transcribed (excerpt) by the author (below). Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive and from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot, Eds.), in press. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.

3

using with maj chords beginning on

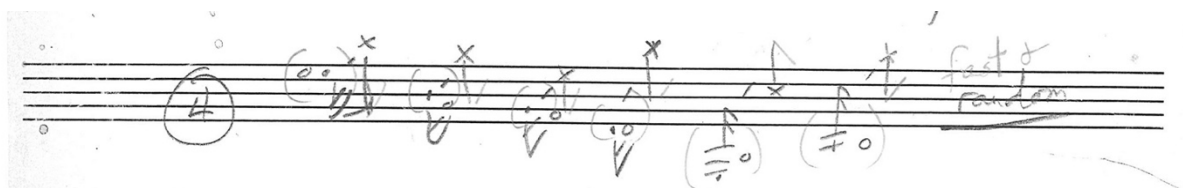
slow melody in B \flat min maj 7

3

3

slow melody in B \flat min maj 7 tonality

Figure 11 Section 3 of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility* in the score's manuscript (above) and edited version (in the middle), and transcribed (excerpt) by the author (below). Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive and from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot, Eds.), in press. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.



4

fast and random, pull-off with open strings

4

Fast



Figure 12 Section 4 of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility* in the score's manuscript (above) and edited version (in the middle), and transcribed (excerpt) by the author (below). Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive and from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot, Eds.), in press. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.

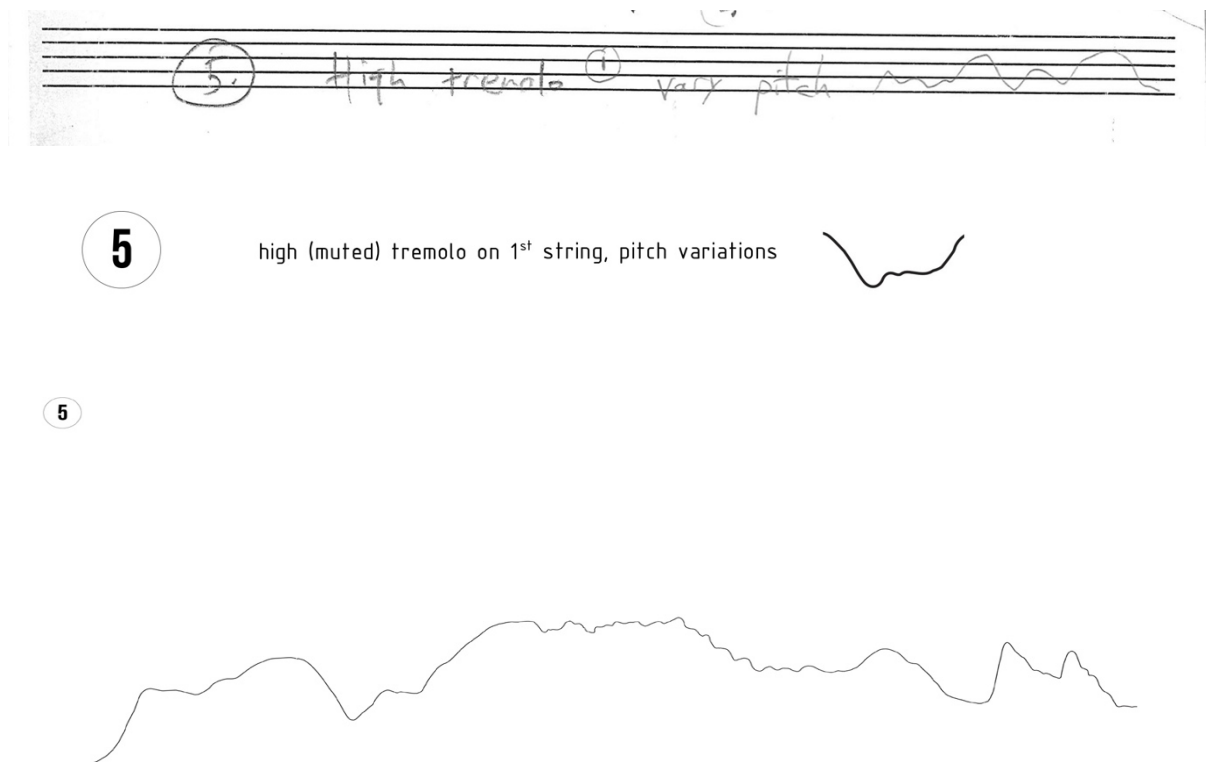


Figure 13 Section 5 of *Etude #1 (Five Gestures)* from Marc Ribot's *Exercises in Futility* in the score's manuscript (above) and edited version (in the middle), and transcribed by the author (below). Reprinted with permission from the composer's archive and from *Exercises in Futility* by M. Ribot (F. Naibo & M. Ribot, Eds.), in press. Copyright 2008 by Marc Ribot.

Conclusion

Exercises in Futility is a work many guitarists are curious about. Despite its discographic success, since its release there have not been concerts, tours, video recordings, performances or promotional materials. Up to now, no research had ever been conducted on this work. The project discussed in this paper gave rise to an edition of Ribot's work that includes transcriptions of their performance by the composer. Both edited score and transcriptions allow to better understand Ribot's ideas and approach to music and composition, which are very personal and can bring freshness to the classical guitar repertoire.

The project's outputs are expected to have an impact on various fields including a widespread knowledge of this work and an increasing interest for Ribot's music and an improvisation-oriented repertoire; the use of the scores in pedagogical activities and personal study; and the integration of this collection of studies in the assorted catalog of collections of studies for classical guitar, along with renowned composers such as Sor, Villa-Lobos, Brouwer and others.

References

- Bio*. (n.d.). marc ribot. Retrieved May 30, 2022, from <https://www.marcribot.com/bio>
- Collins. (n.d.). Futility. In *Collins dizionario online inglese*. Retrieved May 30, 2022, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/it/dizionario/inglese/futility>
- Dawson, S. (Interviewer), & Ribot, M. (Interviewee). (2016, May 4). Marc Ribot (No. 8) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Music Makers and Soul Shakers Podcast*. Steve Dawson Production. <https://www.makersandshakerspodcast.com/podcast/8-marc-ribot>
- Discography*. (n.d.). marc ribot. Retrieved May 30, 2022, from <https://www.marcribot.com/discography>
- Frantz Casseus* (n.d.). marc ribot. <https://www.marcribot.com/frantz-casseus>
- Hermes, W. (2010, November 16). *Silent movies*. RollingStone.com. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/silent-movies-113353>
- Jarasum Jazz Festival (2018, December 7). *Marc Ribot Solo 'FLICKER' | Jarasum Jazz Festival 2018*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=df_KlIPpc58&t=85s
- Jarnow, J. (2008, March 23). *Exercises in Futility – Marc Ribot*. Jambands.com. <http://www.jambands.com/reviews/cds/2008/03/23/exercises-in-futility-marc-ribot>
- John Zorn: The Book of Heads*. (n.d.). Tzadik. <http://www.tzadik.com/index.php?catalog=7009>
- Leon, J. (2013, September 13). *Marc Ribot at Issue Project Room 9-12-13 Pt.3*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaeDYHdhD3k>
- Marc Ribot: Exercises in Futility*. (n.d.). Tzadik. <http://www.tzadik.com/index.php?catalog=8046>
- McKenzie, C. (2008, May 2). *Marc Ribot's Mean-Tempered Guitar*. The Jazz Monster. <http://jazzmonster.blogspot.ch/2008/05/marc-ribots-mean-tempered-guitar.html>
- Music Hunter Blog. (2014, May 19). *Marc Ribot Interview* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGI8VTYahxl>
- Prosaic, A. (Director). (2007). *La corde perdue* [The lost string] [DVD]. La Huite.
- Radio Študent. (2011, April 14). *Marc Ribot, interview part 1* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNOBF1gQaDA>
- Ribot, M. (2003, January 1). *Frantz Casseus*. BOMB. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/frantz-casseus>
- Zampino, P. (2008, March 14). *Marc Ribot: Exercises in Futility*. The Squid's Ear. <http://www.squidsear.com/cgi-bin/news/newsView.cgi?newsID=613>
- Zorn, J. (1978). *The Book of Heads*. Hips Road Edition.

Francesca Naibo, Italian guitarist, studied in Venice, Milan, Bern and Basel. Her studies focused her commitment to classical and contemporary music, improvisation and all the different conjugations of the guitar. She's an active performer and co-edited the first edition of *Exercises in Futility* by Marc Ribot (awaiting publication). In 2020 her first solo album *Namatoulee* was released by Aut Records. Besides her artistic activity, Francesca is a passionate teacher at the I.C. "R. Franceschi" in Milan.

Email: francesca.naibo@gmail.com