

REVIEW

## *Archetypes*

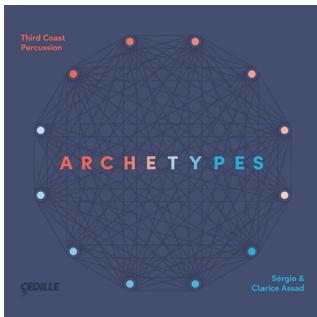
NATHAN CORNELIUS

### *Archetypes*

Sérgio Assad, Clarice Assad, and Third Coast Percussion

Cedille 201, 2021, 1 compact disc

ARCHETYPES IS THE PRODUCT of a collaboration between Sérgio Assad, a fixture of the classical guitar world for some four decades, his daughter Clarice Assad, a prolific and versatile composer who also performs on piano, guitar, and vocals, and the Chicago-based quartet Third Coast Percussion. The listener is encouraged to explore Third Coast's other recent recordings, especially *Paddle to the Sea* (Cedille 175, 2018), for other examples of innovative yet highly accessible music for percussion ensemble.



This suite is based on twelve of the many personality archetypes derived by Jungian psychologists from stories and myths the world over. Each composer chose to write on the archetypes they found particularly intriguing, and the individuality of these characters comes through clearly, creating

a rich range of contrast across the entire set. Yet their renditions are no stock characters that can be pigeonholed as good or bad: even the vigorous “Hero” need not necessarily be heard as virtuous. Instead, they contain subtle changes of emotion and often ambiguity, inviting reflection on the deeper significance of each archetype.

Four movements are composed by Clarice Assad, four by Sérgio, and four by Third Coast Percussion—that is to say, one by each of its members (David Skidmore, Peter Martin, Robert Dillon, and Sean Connors). The style of the pieces is eclectic: Latin jazz is perhaps the most noticeable influence in the Assads' pieces, while minimalism is more present in Third Coast's pieces (although the pacing is much faster than in, say, a typical Philip Glass work). Yet the set is remarkably coherent across the different movements, as each of the six composers combines the same palette of timbres—mainly guitar, piano, marimba, and vibraphone—in slightly different

ways. Drums, cymbals, and plenty of unusual objects play a supporting role along the way. In its entirety, the suite is a fantastic exploration of the textures and timbres available with this novel grouping of instruments.

Just as the artists distributed the work of composing among themselves, the texture of the work is very much a conversation among equals, with no individual taking the spotlight for long. The guitar most often pairs with the marimba or vibraphone to form the main accompaniment layer in a larger texture, and all the composers seem to be on the same page as to how to blend guitar and percussion effectively. Full-blown guitar solos are rarer, although they do seem to crop up more frequently in the pieces by Sérgio Assad (especially “Magician” and “Explorer”). While the members of Third Coast Percussion are generally more conservative in their guitar writing, their work evinces careful attention to the guitar’s strengths.

“Rebel” (by Clarice) opens with a brash percussion fanfare which may cause listeners to adjust their speakers. Hand-claps usher in a steady groove in twelve that constantly shifts between groupings of  $3 \times 4$ ,  $4 \times 3$ , and  $6 \times 2$ . Piano, guitar, and percussion weave in and out as accompaniment to a free-spirited vocalise with a Middle Eastern flair. “Innocent” and “Orphan” (both by Sérgio) both have rich background textures that seamlessly blend vibraphone and marimba. “Innocent” features a wordless vocal lullaby, while “Orphan” seems to wander through various tonalities while repeating a mournful melodic hook. “Lover” (by David Skidmore) is an intimate duet between piano and vibraphone over a gently arpeggiated background of marimba and guitar. The instruments trade short ascending melodic phrases, as if repeating back each other’s thoughts to see if they understand fully. “Magician” (Sérgio again) has a mysterious descending half-step motto in the vibraphone and guitar which expands into virtuosic arpeggios traded back and forth. Later, it settles into a steadier piano-driven groove, again featuring sophisticated hemiolas.

In “Ruler” (by Peter Martin), a simple, majestic C-major guitar solo becomes a ground for continuous variations which gradually gain power and rhythmic drive as the other instruments join one by one. Initially, low piano notes add subtle sustain and depth to the guitar chords; then tom-toms, castanets, wood blocks, and snare drum fill in ever more pulses. In a “Behind the Scenes” video on Third Coast’s YouTube channel, Martin explains that he envisioned this buildup as an oppressive force compelling others to fall into line. However, it could also be heard as a nobler form of civic persuasion, marshaling the community’s strengths behind a common goal. Perhaps that is too optimistic for the early 2020s, or perhaps it speaks to the enigmatic nature of power, where the same authority can easily appear as benevolent or oppressive to different observers.

“Jester” (by Clarice) kicks off the second half of the set with a delightfully weird jaw-harp solo with flexatone whoops in the background. This dissolves into a maniacal drum fill and is replaced by what seems to be a kazoo solo in the style of a gloating chipmunk. Assad told Yaz Lancaster of *I Care If You Listen* that this movement is in the format of a “predetermined improvisation,” in the spirit of the interactive

VOXploration (vocal improvisation) classes she has developed. A complete contrast to this is “Caregiver” (also by Clarice), with a gently flowing melody, reminiscent of late Beethoven, traded between vibraphone, piano, marimba, and guitar.

“Sage” (by Robert Dillon) conjures a spacious, resonant sound world emulating the percussion music of George Crumb. The Delphic utterances of the sage include crunchy piano chords, bent notes on vibraphone and guitar, rumbling tam-tams, and rapid vocal whispers that hover just beyond comprehensibility. “Creator” (by Sean Connors) is, appropriately, another loose set of variations. A slow vibraphone theme generates an assortment of faster descendants or creatures, in almost heterophonic style. One of the last iterations has the melody simultaneously whistled, hummed, and played as tremolo on small bells. “Hero” (by Clarice) also has an infectious rhythmic groove with a prominent hemiola. This time the marimba drives the accompaniment forward, while the guitar shines with virtuosic solos reminiscent of jazz improvisations. The final movement, “Explorer” (by Sérgio), is perhaps the most aggressive, with dissonant metallic chords and a phrygian modal feel. Restless rhythms shifting between seven- and eight-pulse meters form the basis for more improvisatory forays on guitar and piano.

The *Archetypes* program was first performed and recorded in early 2020 but not released on CD until March 2021. It’s unfortunate that only a few audiences have had the opportunity to experience it live, following the suspension of most concerts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guitarists and composers interested in richly orchestrated, toe-tapping music for guitar and percussion are encouraged to remedy this by purchasing or streaming this recording.



### *About the Reviewer*

NATHAN CORNELIUS pursues a multifaceted career in performance, composition, and teaching. He received an MM in composition and guitar performance from the University of Denver’s Lamont School of Music and a DMA in guitar performance from the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University, and has received competition first prizes as a solo, chamber, and concerto guitarist. His performances and research focus on guitar music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and how it reflects cultural conceptions of time and memory. Cornelius currently teaches musicianship and music theory at Towson University and the Johns Hopkins University. He enjoys sharing with students his enthusiasm for the patterns underlying the structure of Western music, and he pursues new ways to understand and play with those patterns through his research.

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