

later Viennese Classical style, deserves to be better known and understood, and Schmitt has done us all a service by bringing its jewels to light. After his 1996 recording focusing on the Baroque guitar music of Gerau, Sanz, Murcia, and Santa Cruz (*Gitarrenmusik des Barock: Spanien*, Musicaphon 56819), Schmitt recorded two albums of Spanish works for the six-double-course guitar, with *De gusto muy delicado* (La Mà da Guido LMG2108) in 2011 and *Spanish Music for 6-Course Guitar around 1800* (Centaur CRC3277) in 2012. His 2016 recording *Nouvelles étrennes de guitare* (La Mà da Guido LMG2139) focused on late music for the five-course guitar, establishing that that instrument overlapped and co-existed to a significant extent with its six-course cousin. With 2019's *Juegos filarmónicos* (Lindoro NL-3044), Schmitt returns to some of the composers on his 2011 and 2012 recordings and introduces others from the same milieu. If some aficionados of the guitar have imagined that Spanish guitar music in the era after Sanz somehow began with Sor and ended with Aguado, Schmitt has done as much as anyone to show us otherwise.

Schmitt's instrument, with its six double courses, is the guitar most rarely encountered today. He acquits himself well, using a flesh right-hand technique instead of nails but achieving a precision of tone just the same. Schmitt plays with taste and judgment but is too much of the scholar to allow his personality as a performer to come before a faithful presentation. At its best, this musical style achieves a transcendent naturalness and simplicity. Schmitt is aware of this and often accomplishes it, though sometimes a rubato sneaks in that might be more appropriate either in earlier or in later music. As welcome as his presentation of this little-known repertoire is, we will not be able to say we understand this music until it has been played and interpreted in many different hands. There is room for more recorded versions of these works as they seek a place in the culture of the guitar. Let's hope that this interesting recording will tempt more hands to take it up.

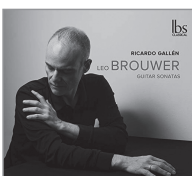
—ELLWOOD COLAHAN

CD Review

Leo Brouwer: Guitar Sonatas.

Ricardo Gallén. IBS 142019, 2019. 2 CDs.

Leo Brouwer's 1990 Sonata for guitar has been a staple on concert and competition programs for some years now. But we are going to have to get used to seeing the designation "No. 1" next to it: Brouwer explains that at the time, it indeed "was meant to be the only one," but in the early 2010s, he found himself drawn back to the genre and produced an explosion of equally brilliant sonatas dedicated to various guitarists. Of these, *Sonata del caminante* (No. 2), for Odair Assad, and



Sonata del Decamerón negro (No. 3), for Costas Cotsiolis, are starting to become well known. The present recording by Spanish guitarist Ricardo Gallén, dedicatee of *Sonata del pensador* (No. 4), is the first compilation of all Brouwer's sonatas by a single performer. In addition, Gallén has arranged Brouwer's *Sonata de los misterios*, originally for archlute, in a version for the guitar that has the composer's imprimatur as *Sonata de los enigmas* (No. 6).

Gallén is eminently qualified to be the first to bring us all the Brouwer sonatas in a single package. His technique and tone leave nothing to be desired in dispatching these formidable works. Furthermore, both the meditative liner notes to the recording and the subtitle of the sonata dedicated to him attest that Gallén has the requisite intellectual depth and breadth to successfully interpret Brouwer. As the composer comments, "the protagonists of these pieces of mine are at the same time masters of solitude, of inquiry, of the search that begins by nourishing itself in silence on the entire history of culture. If there is anyone who fully responds to these parameters, it is Ricardo Gallén."

Brouwer advocates a Renaissance-man aesthetic which eschews the banality of "little pieces [piecécitas] ... that invade authentic genres," and his sonatas display an eclectic breadth of musical inspiration, alluding to sources from Beethoven to Tárrega to Milán to Afro-Cuban folk styles, along with a generous sprinkling of self-quotation. The tone of these quotations is often parodic or sardonic, as if the composer takes neither himself nor the classical pantheon too seriously. Out of this array of material, Brouwer forges an idiosyncratic style, balancing playful and mercurial freedom of tone and texture with systematic, deliberate development of motivic cells.

Before reviewing the highlights of the collection, it would be worthwhile to dwell on the very first measure of the first sonata. The work begins with an accented natural harmonic G sharp (colorful and slightly "mistuned," since it is the fifth partial of the low E string), followed closely by a rapid gesture which (as it develops in subsequent measures) seamlessly blends arpeggio and slur techniques into a fluid whole. This gesture lands on a fretted G natural, one semitone below the harmonic, creating a sharp dissonance which draws the listener in. Yet, thanks to the differing sonic envelopes of fretted notes and harmonics, the G natural fades quickly away, while the G sharp rings on, gradually erasing the dissonance. In many ways, this gesture is a microcosm of Brouwer's genius: his intimate knowledge of the instrument's sonic qualities allows him to create multilayered textures balancing diverse timbres and articulations. The overlapping of natural notes and harmonics, and of arpeggios and slurs, are two of his favorite devices throughout the cycle.

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As for the rest of the sonata, Gallén displays a fascinating variety of articulation in the bolero sections early in the first movement (“Fandangos y boleros”), along with clearly distinguished timbral colors in the later boleros which gradually accrete additional material. At the end of the movement, Beethoven bursts in with an idea from his “Pastoral” Symphony; Gallén depicts him with an appropriately gruff pizzicato timbre. The “Sarabanda de Scriabin” features an expansive and luminous ostinato which occasionally hosts a motive from the introduction of the first movement. Gallén deploys tasteful tapering of phrases and creates a sense of lush polyphony in the middle section, with the motive standing out in relief.

The final movement, “La toccata de Pasquini,” riffs on the Baroque composer’s *Scherzo del cucco*, in which the falling minor-third “cuckoo” call is maddeningly pervasive. Unlike many performers, Gallén does not take this movement at breakneck speed, which is a boon. Every note in the arpeggio texture is fully formed, and the motto in the bass is always incisively clear. Nevertheless, Gallén certainly possesses the firepower needed for scorching runs when he so desires, as evidenced by the brilliant final cadence. In the middle of the movement and again near the end, Brouwer quotes the preceding Sarabanda, including the cyclic motive. (This time, the second note of the motive stays the same as the first instead of descending, which I’d always suspected might be a misprint. Nevertheless, Gallén, with Brouwer’s approval, plays the notes as they appear in the score of the finale, not as they were in the earlier movements.)

Sonata del caminante (No. 2) was written for Odair Assad during his time as a “wanderer” in Europe. Unable to perform as a duo with his brother for a time, he commissioned Brouwer to write him a solo work paying tribute to the landscapes of his native Brazil. The opening “Visión de la Amazonia” is, in typical Brouwer style, episodic in nature, alternating between placid overlapping textures with harmonics, motoric ostinati harmonized in fourths and fifths on the lower strings, and cascading bursts of slurred gestures. All movements of this sonata are played attacca, so these gestures lead seamlessly into the second movement, “El gran sertão,” titled after the classic Brazilian novel by João Guimarães Rosa, set in the prairie or “outback” of northeastern Brazil. A single repeated note eventually sprouts a second voice which slowly descends, leading into an A major tonality with a contemplative melody. After a brief interruption of a more hurried texture, the melody returns at the end of the movement, where Brouwer gives it even more room to breathe.

“Danza festiva” features a pulsating rhythm and kaleidoscopically varied articulations and timbres, which Gallén executes brilliantly. This movement quotes from Brouwer’s Etude No. 19, eventually becoming an extended

harmonic variation on its characteristic texture. The work closes with “Toccata nordestina,” also in syncopated rhythm with highly Brazilian flavor, close in spirit to many compositions by the other Assad brother. Toward the end, the constant rhythm disintegrates and the beautiful descending line from the second movement recurs as an interlude (much as in the finale of Sonata No. 1), before a fast-paced coda.

Like Brouwer’s well-known suite of the same title, *Sonata del Decamerón negro* (No. 3) is inspired by West African folklore. The first movement, “Güijes y gnomos,” is set in an African-inspired additive meter, occasionally interrupted by Bartók pizzicato. Brouwer explains that the *güije* is a Cuban aquatic sprite or gnome, somewhat like a leprechaun. Judging by this movement, their activity must be quite frenetic indeed. In the middle of the movement, Luys de Milán (a favorite semi-fictional character of Brouwer’s) visits the gnomes with a pseudo-Renaissance tiento, with unisons against the B string evoking the courses of the vihuela.

The second movement, “Treno por Oyá,” in arch form, includes overlapping gestures with harmonics, measured sections in habanera rhythm, and fast toccata-like passages. In traditional Yoruba religion, Oyá is the goddess of winds, change, and death, and a sense of foreboding pervades much of this movement. “Burlesca del Aire” features another additive rhythm with an addictive pulse, eventually devolving into another manic toccata. The middle section includes a parody of Tárrega’s *Adelita* (but with its mazurka rhythm stretched out so it seems to be in 12/8 time), before climaxing in a blaze of slurs, rasgueados, and percussion.

The final movement, “La risa de los Griots,” refers to the musical storytellers of West African culture. It opens with a mysterious fragment of melody, stated first in harmonics, then more boldly in octaves, and finally confirmed as the melodic gestures over a repeated-chord accompaniment. Coming in for parody this time is Erik Satie’s first *Gnossienne*.

As mentioned above, the fourth installment in the cycle, *Sonata del pensador*, was written for Gallén himself in 2013 and seems to depict the intellectual life in music. In the first movement, “Recuperación de la memoria,” a brief and appropriately nostalgic introduction lets Gallén display some beautiful tasto tone, and a faster syncopated section is spiked with sharp ponticello and pizzicato. These two blocks of texture and color alternate throughout the movement. “Iluminaciones” has a delicate tremolo texture, which forms a delicious contrast to the surrounding movements. In the face of repeated incursions from bold bass notes, rasgueados, and Bartók pizzicato, it eventually switches into a virtuosic toccata. The movement ends with understated repeated octaves, much like the first movement of Sonata No. 1.

“Elogio de la meditación” opens with beautiful campanella gestures, which Gallén allows to breathe fully. Much of this movement is based on material from Brouwer’s Concerto No. 5, including the hypnotic arpeggios from the “Lightness and Heaviness” movement and the poignant melody which concludes each movement of the concerto. Perhaps these are the subject of the thinker’s ponderings. The finale, titled “Celebración de la memoria,” is another Afro-Cuban dance, continually interrupted by jagged octave or tremolo passages. The calmer middle section is built over a habanera-like rhythm which has been tweaked slightly into an asymmetrical 7-meter.

Brouwer writes that Sonata No. 5, *Ars combinatoria*, commissioned by Julian Bream through his trust, “has the same form and structure as the first [sonata] which had been requested years before” by Bream, but it is unclear what exactly the similarity is. Brouwer explains that the growth of the piece is governed by the Fibonacci series (2, 3, 5, 8, 13, ...) as each gesture systematically accretes more material. While the mathematical details of this process are hidden from the listener, the overall effect is one of subtle, organic growth.

The opening Toccata circulates among repeated notes, aggressive chords, a noisy Bartók pizzicato gesture, and improvisatory-sounding melodies. “Fantasía que contrahaze la harpa,” like its namesake by Mudarra, features lots of campanella and virtuosic cross-string alternation, with heavy use of slurs. These passages alternate with a more staid fantasía in pseudo-Renaissance style, with Brouwer’s distinctive overlapping harmonics floating above. The lively Finale has more pizzicato syncopated gestures, pulsating chords, harmonics, and rapid slurred gestures. Again, some sort of spiraling accretion process seems to be governing the progress of the music. Overall, this sonata is perhaps a bit more acerbic than Brouwer’s other recent works, perhaps due to its tritone-heavy harmonic language.

The final installment in the cycle, *Sonata de los enigmas*, was originally written for lutenist Edin Karamazov. Gallén’s arrangement fits very naturally within the confines of

six strings. The opening Preludio has a pseudo-Baroque passaggio with bass notes creating a sense of stable harmonic and rhythmic underpinnings, but Brouwer’s penchant for rhythmic and gestural irregularity soon takes over, and the music starts to branch out in various directions. In the middle of the movement, this gives way to a solidly D-minor sarabande, with ornamented variations and expanding refrains in between them.

For “Pavana melancólica (con el permiso de Luys de Milán),” the sixth string is tuned down to B to simulate the extended range of the archlute. The movement features biting dissonant sonorities, sharp pizzicato, and haunting melodies executed in mandolin-style brush tremolo over long-ringing harmonics. Gradually, the tonality works its way to E major, with many colorful dissonances along the way, before dissolving into a pseudo-Renaissance pavane with mixolydian inflection and light ornamentations. Scurrying toccata gestures interrupt into the gap caused by the pavane’s fading away. The movement ends mysteriously on a phrygian cadence. The concluding “Fantasía y toccata,” after an expansive introduction, launches into a repeated-note tremolo with unpredictable accented notes standing out in relief over and under it, which Gallén executes brilliantly, alternating with slur-heavy ostinato passages.

This is a masterful recording of a masterful body of repertoire. Brouwer’s detailed awareness of the tonal subtleties of the guitar and his polyglot compositional language give these works a richness rivaled by few others. Gallén closes his liner notes with the assertion that Brouwer’s sonatas, as the first body of such substantial works by a modern guitarist, will be for the guitar what *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Beethoven’s sonatas, or Chopin’s études were for the piano: a thorough and imaginative exploration of the technical and musical possibilities of the instrument: “It is no exaggeration to say that Leo Brouwer has changed the fate of the classical guitar forever.”

—NATHAN CORNELIUS

