

CD Review-Article:
**New Chamber Music
 with Guitar—The Aleph
 Gitarrenquartett, Gubaidulina,
 and Plucking**



In some corners of the classical music world, composers have been undertaking a radical exploration of timbre (or tone color) in recent years. This exploratory drive is often associated with the spectralist movement, which understands timbre and harmony as two ends of a continuum, defined by the harmonic spectrum of overtones present within a sound. The movement began to emerge in the 1970s, centered in France (around the ensemble *L'itinéraire* and its founding composers, Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail) and in Germany (among composers influenced by the Darmstadt school, notably Georg Friedrich Haas). To fully exploit the musical resources revealed by spectralism, composers seek to squeeze all potential tone colors out of their instrument(s), whether by “normal” or “extended” techniques. In order to maximize the palette of available colors, these composers typically paint on a grand scale of sound, writing for large chamber ensemble or orchestra (as in seminal works such as Grisey’s *Les espaces acoustiques* or Haas’ *in vain*). However, the guitar, with its uniquely broad palette of shadings within normal tone, combined with ample opportunities for jury-rigging to create more exotic sounds, also seems naturally attractive to artists working from this viewpoint, as aptly demonstrated by Murail’s *Tellur* for solo guitar. In many cases, recent composers influenced by spectralism are interested in the guitar not for its solo capabilities but for its distinctive contribution of color to a larger ensemble. The resulting chamber music including one or more guitars represents a major injection of new sounds and ideas into the guitar ensemble repertoire.

One of the leading exponents of this music in recent years has been the ensemble known as the **Aleph Gitarrenquartett**. While their eponymous *Volume 1* album (NEOS 11208, 2012) introduced works by some of the most prominent German composers on the leading edge of this movement, such as Haas and Beat Furrer, their *Volume 2* album (NEOS 11710, 2017) features lesser-known names but no less fascinating music, with works by contemporary German and Spanish composers. The works on this disc take the listener on a revelatory journey through a series of sonic landscapes far off the beaten path, built up like watercolors out of layers of harmonics, pizzicato, and scraping sounds. At times, the guitarists deploy implements such as plectrums and glass slides to extract an even wider range of timbres from the instruments. Nicolaus A. Huber’s *Die entkommene Orpheus* (The Escaped Orpheus) goes even

further and also requires a glasses case, “spitting object,” “sensitive plaster,” and an actual metronome ticking along as accompaniment.

The album continues with Alberto Hortigüela’s *Die Sprache ist die Strafe* (Language is the Punishment), a Kafkaesque exploration of precisely executed, almost mechanical textures (the detailed liner notes confirm that the composer indeed had in mind the intricate torture apparatus from Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*). Irene Galindo Quero’s *Ziffer h Hut* (Figure h Hat) disrupts the structure of the instrument with “prepared guitars” having what sound like paper clips hooked around the strings and “mobile bridges” facilitating string bends on the “wrong” side of the fret. Mathias Spahlinger’s *entfernte ergänzung* (remote completion) moves towards dispensing with the fretboard altogether, as the guitarists explore indeterminately pitched notes with glass slides or playing in the extreme high register.

Another recent project from the Aleph Quartet is a haunting reimagination of Schubert’s *Winterreise* song-cycle by Bernhard Lang, part of his *Monadologies* series, entitled *The Cold Trip* (Kairos 0015018, 2017). Lang has not only translated the texts of all the Schubert songs into English but also chopped up both words and music into small bits which he loops repeatedly in a manner influenced by American minimalism (particularly the tape loop pieces of John Cage or Steve Reich). Each song in Lang’s version is clearly derived from its source, yet is distorted in a way that seems to enhance the sinister undertones of the cycle. The project is divided into two parts: The first dozen songs are sung by Sarah Maria Sun, accompanied by the Aleph Quartet on two classical guitars, a steel-string acoustic guitar, and an acoustic bass, while the second dozen are sung by Juliet Fraser, accompanied by a fantastic concoction of electronic sounds performed by Mark Knoop on laptop and keyboard.

Like much of the Aleph Quartet’s other repertoire, Lang’s work makes frequent use of microtonal tunings, harmonics, pizzicato, and unconventional playing techniques to conjure remarkable sonorities out of the ensemble. The repetitive nature of the melodies and harmonies is helpful in giving the listener time to process and savor these surprises. Soprano Sun delivers a powerful and haunting performance with great emotional range, and the audio is mixed so that both voice and guitars are always clearly heard, despite the enormous dynamic contrasts involved. Both Aleph releases are nothing like the standard guitar quartet fare, but listeners hungry for something more will find much to ruminate on here.

Another important voice in the German classical-music scene, arriving by way of Russia, is Sofia Gubaidulina. Born in 1931 in what was then the Tatar Republic within the

Soviet Union, she built a successful career as a composer in Russia before moving to Germany after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Her music often juxtaposes diverse and contrasting blocks of material, whether Eastern versus Western elements, serenity versus activity, or consonance versus dissonance, and these qualities are evident in the two masterful large-scale chamber works on the recent Naxos release, *Sofia Gubaidulina: Complete Guitar Works* (Naxos 8.573379, 2015), by guitarist David Tanenbaum and his colleagues at the San Francisco Conservatory and San Francisco Symphony.

Gubaidulina pursues the same overall textural strategy in both works: *Repentance* for three guitars, cello, and double bass, and *Sotto Voce* for two guitars, viola, and double bass. The presence of the bass in particular, playing both *pizzicato* and *arco*, allows Gubaidulina both to deepen the sonorities of the plucked instruments and to create a dialogue with the higher bowed instrument. Both works are driven along by the contrast, even conflict, between areas of dense and noisy micropolyphony, chorale-like major and minor triads, and insistent repetition of single notes. In the composer's words (quoted in the liner notes), "The constant endeavour to penetrate the mysterious consonance in the guitar's chords of harmonics is forever proving itself to be fruitless. And thus we always have to return to the darker shades."

Gubaidulina also takes full advantage of the color palette afforded by this ensemble, demanding all sorts of plucked, strummed, bowed, and scraped sounds. At times, the guitarists get the delicious opportunity to improvise freely with bottleneck slides, drinking glasses, or a bizarre apparatus consisting of a rubber ball attached to a spring made of piano wire (in case several attempts are required to construct said apparatus, this author is relieved to be able to report that a bag of suitable balls can be obtained inexpensively on the internet). Gubaidulina's notation for these passages leaves some ambiguity in the rhythmic and textural relationship of the instruments, and Tanenbaum and his all-star collaborators realize a clear and decisive interpretation, though by no means the only possible one.

Guitarists interested in chamber music with string players beyond the standard violin/guitar or cello/guitar duos will find these Gubaidulina works to be a refreshing and satisfying project. The two shorter solo works on the disc, *Serenade* and *Toccata*, date from much earlier in Gubaidulina's career and are much more akin to traditional guitar idioms and textures, with a hint of Spanish flavor present particularly in *Serenade*. Incredibly, *Toccata* had never been recorded prior to this album and certainly deserves to be heard more often.

Finally, an idiosyncratic American addition to the category of music for plucked instruments in the broad

sense, aptly titled *Plucking* (MicroFest Records MF9, 2017) comes from the Just Strings collective, one of the many projects of versatile guitarist John Schneider. True to their name, the existence of strings is just about the only thing the instruments heard on this disc have in common: besides guitar (a custom microtonal design with individual fretlets), we also hear double bass, harp, harpsichord, kora, koto, oud, sitar, and tar (a Persian version of the sitar). Following on their recent album of works by Lou Harrison and John Luther Adams (MicroFest Records MF7, 2015), this disc is devoted to the music of Tom Johnson, an American composer notorious for works which are conceptually simple yet maddeningly complex to perform, such as *The Four Note Opera*, *The Chord Catalogue*, and *Narayana's Cows*.

The disc opens with selections from Johnson's *Rational Melodies*, so-called because they are generated from mathematical processes, unfolding like a geometric fractal, with each part a miniature replica of the whole. Like many of Johnson's works, the *Melodies* do not specify their instrumentation, but the Just Strings collective fills in the proliferation of musical shapes with an equal diversity of timbres, performing each melody on a plucked instrument from a different culture. They further play up the "rational" aspect of the music by setting each melody in a just-intonation or integer-ratio tuning, which highlights the distinctive aspects of its scalar construction. The result is a highly engaging listening experience, as the ear is immediately aware of the presence of a self-generating logic which somehow always remains submerged just beneath the music's surface, eluding attempts to grasp its details in real time.

The largest work on the disc in both length and instrumentation is *Plucking*, in which the nine different plucked instruments form nine different colors in a huge mosaic that unfolds gradually over stretches of several minutes at a time. Once again, the relationships between the instruments are mathematically governed, as Johnson explores all possible color combinations within a small germ of musical material. The effect of these slowly and inexorably shifting patterns is never boring, but fascinating and kaleidoscopic, akin to the works of minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and John Adams. The rich and noisy sound palette of the guitar and its multicultural cousins gives Johnson's work a deeply human authenticity and individuality. The disc concludes with two works for bass, *Doublings for Double Bass* and the self-referential *Failing: a very difficult piece for solo bass*, realized quite successfully (or, as the case may be, failingly) by bassist Tom Peters and worth a listen by guitarists as well, as a lesson on multitasking—not to mention the music itself.

As guitarists, we are fortunate to enjoy a wide range of potential collaborations with instruments plucked, bowed,

REVIEWS: (cont.)

struck, or sung. (Developing a substantial repertoire for guitar and wind instruments is still a work in progress, but adventurous composers are exploring that as well.) These collaborations afford us an avenue into many potential audiences with whom we can share our work. Furthermore, the insights we gain from working with musicians of different sorts can also enrich how we make music in our own milieu, among fellow guitarists. It is my hope that the recent works heard on these recordings will stimulate both performers and composers of the guitar world to perceive our instrument in a new light and enjoy even more of its magnificent wealth of tones and timbres.

—NATHAN CORNELIUS

CD Review:

Alfabeto falso: Vallerotondo, Simone, with I Bassifondi. Arcana A435, 2017. 1 CD.



Everything Old, New Again

Simone Vallerotondo, the Italian theorbist and Baroque guitar specialist, is so persuaded of the need to present solo guitar and lute music in ensemble performance that he created the ensemble I Bassifondi expressly for that purpose. The result is a new CD entitled *Alfabeto falso*, in reference to the dissonant chords included by early Baroque guitarists in their collections of strummed guitar solos and accompaniments. This style took first Italy, then northern Europe, by storm in the early-to-mid 17th century. He argues his case convincingly from documentary and iconographic evidence in the well-written notes to the album, which also include a bibliography of sources and an interview with Baroque violinist Enrico Onofri on the topic of bringing fresh performance approaches to audiences. But the real proof is in the playing, and here, with the help of Gabriele Miracle on percussion and Josep Maria Marti Duran on the bass *colascione* (a long-necked folk lute of Middle Eastern origin), Vallerotondo's treatment succeeds admirably, allowing these pieces to trade their antiquarian charm for a gritty and compelling immediacy that reaches across the centuries and feels as new as tomorrow.

The CD includes music for the strummed Baroque guitar by dominant figures like Foscari, Santiago de Murcia, and Corbetta, as well as the lesser-known Carbonchi, Valdambrini, and Bartolotti. Foscari opens the disc with three pieces. *Toccata detta l'innamorata* is a short prelude, played in a very free, dramatic style. *Gagliarda Francese* is a rowdy, rollicking dance with lively cross-rhythms, and makes a good contrast to the first. Vallerotondo's *rasgueado* in the outer sections seems the equal of any flamenco player, and his *punteado* solo in

the middle verse is equally fiery. *Passacaglio per la O* is a moderate, minor-key dance in *sarabande* rhythm.

The Italian guitarist Corbetta did more than anyone to establish the Baroque guitar in French court circles. Like Carbonchi, Bartolotti, and Valdambrini, Corbetta's more extended harmonic palette caused him to put aside the *alfabeto falso* notation and write out his dissonant chords note-by-note. His *Passacaglia per la X* is presented solo, with no accompanying bass or percussion.

Carbonchi was particularly experimental as a guitar composer, publishing a series of 32 pieces for an ensemble of 12 guitars, all tuned differently. His *Scaramanzie* (*superstitions* in Italian) is a hard-driving, rhythmically furious piece with a distinctively melodic bassline. A flexible approach to the piece provides space for a guitar solo, followed by a percussion solo, before the *colascione* shepherds the players to a satisfying finish. Bartolotti was another innovator; he published a cycle of *passacaglie* in his first book in all major and minor keys, more than 80 years before Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The *Passacaglia per la D* on this recording is from his second book. It builds to a compelling climax with mode mixture and syncopation. At the very end of the piece, in perhaps the most daring gesture on the album, a single altered chord bridges the tonality of Bartolotti's *Passacaglia* with the one by Corbetta that follows, connecting them into a single, two-part statement. For me the effect was unconvincing, but I salute the artists' courage.

Valdambrini's *Capona* is from his collection of 1646. Based on a short, repeating harmonic pattern, it begins with a highly syncopated and very tonal chord progression that would not sound out of place in a late-20th-century pop song.

Though he is not known to have travelled there himself, Santiago de Murcia's music is in large part known through New World sources, including two manuscripts discovered in Mexico and one in Chile. *Folias Gallegas* is a setting of a Galician folk dance, not the more common *folias* ground bass we are accustomed to. *Cumbées* is a light dance with a fluctuating meter like that of the *canarios*. *Los Impossibles* is accompanied, improbably but effectively, by a wooden xylophone.

Not all of the music comes from *alfabeto* sources. The well-known German-Italian lute virtuoso and composer Kapsberger is represented by five tracks, more than any other composer. Connections to popular culture are, if anything, even more prominent here. *Sfessania* is a *passacaglia* which has been linked by Nino Pirotta to the *commedia dell'arte*, and the version here plays up the edgy street-music feel. The following track, *Passacaglia*, seems to be a pastiche of the five thematically-related *passacaglie* in