



Guitar

The Music of Leo Brouwer by Whitney Pierce

In the last half of the twentieth century, Leo Brouwer contributed many significant compositions to the repertoire for classical guitar. Brouwer was motivated to become a composer when he realized that, "...there was such wonderful music for the piano, violin, cello and other instruments, while the repertoire for the guitar was so meager by comparison. I was so naive that I determined to close the gap."¹ The disparity between the repertoire for guitar and that of other instruments could not be remedied by expanding it in quantity only; it needed to be expanded conceptually and expressively as well. Leo Brouwer composed many pieces, but not an extensive amount. Many of his compositions qualify as part of an enduring and permanent repertoire that will remain significant into the next century. However, he has made many timely explorations into trends and experimental ideas that reacted to the changes that were made in the past century in technology, entertainment and culture. It is a difficult responsibility to find a balance between composing music that communicates fresh and current ideas to a modern audience, and music that will remain a part of a lasting repertoire for the guitar.

Brouwer's music has been divided into three phases. In each phase, Brouwer made adaptations specifically to communicate better with his particular audiences. In each phase, there are compositions that are more successful at reaching these audiences than others. Some of his compositions demonstrate the qualities that allow them to be enduring, while others seem to be more relevant to the audiences of the time. By examining specific pieces in each of these phases, it will be possible to determine the qualities that achieve a

perfect balance.

Brouwer's first phase of composition was "traditional, characterized by an essentially tonal idiom and nationalistic, particularly in the use of Cuban rhythms."² This period begins with his first composition in 1955 to the start of his next phase in 1964. Brouwer was not satisfied with many of these early pieces saying, "I thought they were junk. I had only written them as exercises. The *Danzas Concertantes*, *Danza Caracteristica*, the *Fuge*, *Piece sans Titre*, etc. — all these were practice pieces. I threw them away."³ Although Brouwer is very critical of these pieces, they have been recorded and performed frequently. The *Preludio* and *Fuge* seem to work too hard to fit into the Western repertoire for the guitar that already existed, instead of trying to expand it. The allusions to European models are more imitative than communicative, and fit too easily into the expectations of what serious guitar repertoire should sound like.

The *Piezas Sin Titulos Nos. 1-3* and *Tres Apuntes* are more characteristic of Brouwer's compositional style although they do incorporate European elements. The Afro-Cuban rhythms and folk themes that are present in these compositions give them a very unique and interesting character. They use more of the colors and timbres available to the guitar. Most significantly they differ in the texture that results from Brouwer's unique orchestral style of composition. The *Tres Apuntes* include Western influences, but are effective as part of a permanent repertoire for the guitar because of the exciting use of the guitar sounds. The fusion of the European elements and a unique orchestral style of using the guitar "exemplify Brouwer's predilection for modern orchestral textures and sounds.

He treats the guitar as a small orchestra using color and dynamic contrast to create the effect of simultaneous multiple textures and instruments."⁴ *Danza Caracteristica* is a very effective short piece despite its repetitive form. It is an excellent fusion of guitar colors and effects as well as Cuban rhythms. The piece makes use of contrasts very well to create tension and momentum.

In these early pieces it becomes apparent that they are most vital in their use of orchestral textures and colors. Despite their function as exercises in composition, they do extend the fundamental repertoire for guitar. The Afro-Cuban elements are blended well with European ideas and work to create a very individual aesthetic. They communicated much about the identity of the composer to the audiences of the time — particularly his national identity, and they established a strong character that would continue to be a significant part of Brouwer's compositional style.

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1. Gerd Michael Dausend, "Structure is a Fundamental Element of My Work: An Interview with Leo Brouwer," *Guitar Review*. Summer 1990: 11
2. Dean Suzuki and Martin Brinkerhoff, "An Interview with Leo Brouwer," *Guitar and Lute*. Jan. 1982: 11
3. Dean Suzuki, "Brouwer's Works for the Guitar," *Guitar and Lute*. Jan. 1982: 14.
4. Richard Cobo, liner notes to recording, *Brouwer Guitar Music Vol. 1*, Naxos. LC5537