



Guitar

Leo Brouwer: A Balance of Goals, Part 2

by Whitney Pierce

In her article in the Spring 2000 issue of String Notes, Whitney Pierce discussed Leo Brouwer's first phase of compositions (1955-1964) which were "traditional, characterized by an essentially tonal idiom and nationalistic, particularly in the use of Cuban rhythms."

In 1964 Brouwer composed the piece *Elogio de la danza* which introduced his next style of composition which has been called his avant-garde period. In this phase he experimented with many musical concepts while continuing to use his colorful and orchestral compositional techniques. *Elogio de la danza* retains some of Brouwer's Afro-Cuban roots, but uses a more experimental harmonic vocabulary. This piece "uses the rhythmic-cell technique of the 'Ballets Russes' (as Brouwer terms them) of Igor Stravinsky... compositional techniques which are new both to the music of Leo Brouwer and to the repertoire of the guitar." This piece has a nice balance in the tension of the strange harmonies with the familiar colors that Brouwer has brought out in his earlier pieces.

Another piece in this style, which uses many colors, is *Canticum*. In this piece however, the colors seem overly intense. The piece is "based on a single melodic cell, it features an immense color-palette which includes *metalico*, *rasgueado*, *tamboura* and other known devices, but used here with much more frequency and relish than is traditional. It resorts finally to scordatura E-flat pedal with writhing, irregular melodic waves above." The extravagant use of color and effects in this piece give the impression that Brouwer may have been concerned about creating interest in a piece that is based on such a simple melodic cell. The colors feel layered on in the fashion of a cook who throws in

extra pepper to cover up a recipe that is too bland.

La espiral eterna balances an efficient harmony with an exciting use of color. The structure of this piece is a very complex and interesting concept. The structure mimics the spiral structures found in nature in everything from galaxies to snail shells. The piece uses very elaborate patterns of notes to symbolize the concept. "We hear a group of notes, D-E-D sharp, repeated continuously at high speed... It is not too far-fetched to visualize this group as a spiral in embryo." While it is possible to visualize a spiral symbolized in the composition, it would be very difficult for most modern audiences to appreciate all of the elaborate manifestations of the form in this piece. The piece is more focused on structure than on communicating to the audience.

Brouwer may have been reacting to a changing audience when creating this piece, which requires such a sophisticated understanding of modern music to fully appreciate the concept. Modern audiences of the guitar can be divided into two groups: those with a sophisticated appreciation of musical innovations and those who simply want to find entertainment or relaxation in the music. Brouwer attributes this division to the commercialism that is rampant in modern society: "Today functional music is paralyzed in the commercial arena. Commerce determines the function of music. There are several divisions of the aural phenomenon: dancing music, popular music with text to listen to, etc. On the other hand we find that concert music (i.e. formal, cultivated, classical music) is not commercial. This is a difficult and contradictory situation: concert music, which has vast background and richness, is underestimated. Hence the public does not perceive it or understand it with the same confidence it has in popular music... In the past the function of music was very clear: the audience came together, understood

the themes, the structural details and hopefully, the interpretation. There was no gap between the cultivated and the popular." In *La espiral eterna* and his later structurally complex piece *Parabola*, Brouwer seems to be looking to communicate with the cultivated audiences and avoid the commercialism that would attract the larger audience.

Two of the later pieces of this period, *Metaphora del amor* and *Per suonare a due*, attempt to appeal to the larger audience by using technology and audiovisual devices. However, they do not lose their intellectual richness and would not be considered commercial. *Metaphora del amor* "is quite an impressive work with electronics, in which the guitar represents the body of a woman. It begins when I caress the guitar, and in the course of the piece uncover the character of the instrument. It also has some elements of choreography." Inviting elements of technology and choreography into the music allows Brouwer to attract an audience that is intellectual and sophisticated, but not necessarily cultivated musically. Brouwer believes that using elements of technology and choreography enables the music to communicate more. He attributes this to "the birth of the radio and television industries, both of which have immense audiovisual potential, have changed the way in which music is appreciated. The public is an accurate receptor, for better or for worse, of aural and visual stimuli. I think concert music must change. Concert music acts out of time; its presentation is old. Since people now are able to listen to music at home, going to concerts is less appealing, in part because recitals lack a visual element. With the use of audiovisual devices the public could become more involved with cultivated music."

While the elements of technology and theatrics may allow more communication to this particular audience, it may not have the longevity of pieces that do not incorporate these elements.

One danger of inviting technology into compositions is that technology is constantly advancing. Once it moves on, it may leave behind the piece of music that is dependent on it. Brouwer seems to have realized this in his use of electronics. *Per suonare a due* is composed for solo guitar and tape, or it can be performed with two guitars. It is not completely dependent on technology to be effective. Not having heard a recording of either of these electronic pieces, it is difficult to say whether or not they have potential to be part of a permanent repertoire for the guitar. As long as they do not depend heavily on technology, they may find permanence as part of the repertoire for the guitar.

Not being able to witness the theatrics involved in these pieces makes it difficult to say whether or not they are effective as a mode of improving communication in these pieces. One possible problem with incorporating these elements is that they could distract the audience from listening to the complexities of the music. It may be giving the audience an unnecessary aid in understanding. Just because there is a proliferation of visual stimuli in modern communications does not make it logical to add pictures to books of modern poetry to help the audience understand it better. Visual effects used in moderation could add a deeper level to a piece that does not distract from the music, but it would have to be handled very carefully.

Since the 1980's, Brouwer has moved from his avant-garde period to a more minimalist style of composing. Brouwer calls this his "Neo-Romantic" period, and believes it is a necessary reaction to his previous avant-garde style. Brouwer's main motivation in this period is to communicate better with his audience. Complex conceptual structures do not dominate the compositions, and the harmonic language is more balanced. Brouwer explains his turn from an avant-garde style of composing saying, "I thought that after so much music in this language, the so-called avant-garde — after all the broken lines, rhythms, etc. Music could no longer continue in this direction. A limit had been reached. A limit of non-communication between the performer and the listener..."

In order to communicate better to

the audience, Brouwer has taken out many of the extravagant rhythms and harshly intense colors. Brouwer's new minimalist style attends to the problem of a lack of balance in the compositions and he criticizes the avant-garde as not being balanced. "In this style, the atomized, crisp and 'tensional' language suffers, due to the omission of the essence of compositional balance: movement and tension, with its consequent relaxation of tension. Every living entity needs to rest... This New Simplicity borrows the essential elements from popular music, classical music and the avant-garde itself."

Although Brouwer's music reduces the unresolved tensions of avant-garde music, it does not fall into the trap of other current composers of the minimalist style. The problem with much of the minimalist music today is that it has absolutely no tension and becomes dull and communicates very little. Brouwer's minimalist compositions find a nice balance between the tension of the avant-garde and the relaxation of the minimalist style. Brouwer's use of minimalism also is a logical connection to his Afro-Cuban roots, and the repetition that forms the structures behind the Afro-Cuban tradition. Brouwer accepted minimalism because "...it was inherent to my cultural roots from the 'third world.' Africa and Asia manifest themselves in a minimalist way."

The tie to his Afro-Cuban roots has been very effective in his minimalist style, particularly in the piece *El decameron negro*. This piece creates a wonderful environment of sound that perfectly suits the story that inspired the piece. The echo effects are a great example of minimalism in their repetition, but they are balanced with rhythms and harmonies that add tension. There is an African feel to the rhythms evolving structure and colors that also fit well with the story behind the piece. This piece communicates the themes and emotions of the story on a deep level to the audience, and the expression and balance of all the elements gives this piece a secure place in the repertoire of the guitar.

Other pieces of this period have a wonderful balance that will earn them longevity in the repertoire of the guitar. The *Sonata* and *El Rito de los Orishas*

are minimalist in their structures, but use appropriate colors to add movement and interest. *El Rito de los Orishas* has more of a Cuban connection in its rhythm and colors than the *Sonata*. While the *Sonata* has a more Western influence, it does not have an imitative quality at all, and communicates very articulately. Both take advantage of the specific abilities of the guitar to layer textures in a smooth way that is a product of Brouwer's orchestral style of composing on the guitar. The layers add interest and depth that is very important in maintaining interest in minimalist music.

Leo Brouwer has expanded the repertoire for the guitar significantly. The expansion has not been in the quantity of pieces. The conceptual expansion of the literature for guitar is his true contribution. Although he has explored many ideas in his compositions, many of his pieces are not limited by their experimental nature. The pieces that balance communication with a modern focus and longevity as part of the repertoire for the classical guitar are the most effective. The elements which allow Brouwer to communicate with a modern audience but remain significant over time are his unique concept of the guitar as a miniature orchestra with many layers, and his incorporation of his Afro-Cuban heritage in rhythms and colors. The pieces which balance maximalism and minimalism of structure and tone in his later period have reached a maturity of style and are particularly successful.

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