

INNOVATIONS

EUROPEAN GUITAR COMPOSITIONS OF THE 1970s AND 1980s

BY STEPHEN GOSS

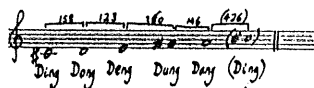
PART 3: ETHNIC INFLUENCES

PART 2 concerned itself with the exploration of non-musical influences on the contemporary guitar repertory, focusing primarily on the appropriation of poetic material. The final articles will demonstrate how composers have drawn on a variety of folkloric and ethnic music sources for the purpose of artistic elaboration.

The exotic sounds of eastern music have excited the imaginations of occidental composers ever since Javanese and Indonesian gamelan orchestras were first heard in the west at the Paris Exposition of 1899. Debussy was the first major figure whose music became suffused with oriental features, and later Messiaen redefined the potentialities of orchestral colour through his emancipation of numerous eastern timbral resources.

As a consequence of the prevalence of plucked and percussive instruments in the musical traditions of Asia, the guitar is capable of evoking the timbral connotations of that genre. The final section of Geoffrey Burgon's guitar quartet *Four Guitars* (1978) draws on the Balinese five-note 'Selisir' scale (Ex.23) used widely by popular gamelan orchestras.¹

(Ex. 23)



Ex.23. Selisir scale with note names and representative interval sizes given in cents (taken from the gamelan gong kebyar of Peliatan village).

Balinese musical form is based on ostinatos called 'tabuh' and at bar 229 of his quartet Burgon sets up a tabuh which dominates the remainder of the composition (Ex.24).

(Ex. 24)



Ex.24. *Four Guitars* (1978) – Geoffrey Burgon (Chester Music, 1984). Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

After much augmentation, transposition and other musical manipulation the tabuh finally brings the work to a close (Ex.25).

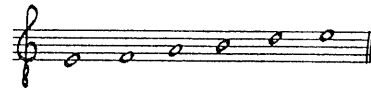
(Ex. 25)



Ex.25. *Four Guitars* – Geoffrey Burgon (Chester Music, 1984). Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

The influence of Japanese traditional music can be observed in Carey Blyton's *Two Japanese Pieces* Op.68 (1976). The first, 'Water Garden', exploits the Japanese 'soft' scale (Ex.28) (which is employed in folk melodies such as Sakura), and the second, 'Koto Music', is based on the 'hard scale' (Ex.27).

(Ex. 26)



Ex.26. The Japanese 'soft' scale.

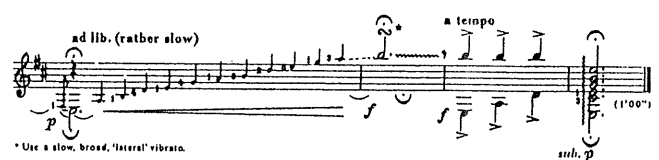
(Ex. 27)



Ex.27 The Japanese 'hard' scale.

In 'Koto Music' Blyton attempts to directly imitate the koto by prescribing the use of a 'slow, broad, lateral vibrato' (Ex.28).

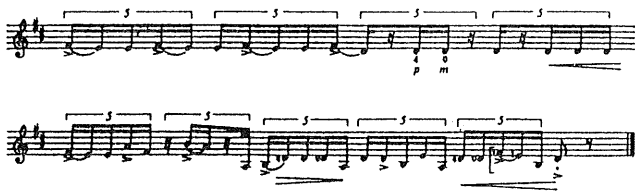
(Ex. 28)



Ex.28. 'Koto Music' from *Two Japanese Pieces* Op.68 (1976) – Carey Blyton. From *Easy Modern Guitar Music* edited by Hector Quine © 1976 Oxford University Press, reprinted with permission.

Whereas Burgon and Blyton apply their own compositional procedures to ethnic influences, Charles Camilleri in his *Four African Sketches* (1980) relies entirely on African based raw materials to crystallise the melodic, rhythmic and formal matrices of his work. The melodic line is pentatonic throughout the score, a common African feature,² and the piece utilises what Brandel calls 'African hemiola style' in its rhythmic structure.³ (An example of this rhythmic technique can be observed in the third piece, 'Circle Dance' (Ex.29).

(Ex. 29)



Ex.29. 'Circle Dance' from *Four African Sketches* (1980) – Charles Camilleri (Cramer 1980). Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

The structural design of each movement is based on African non-developmental forms, for example the first movement, 'Folk Prelude', is responsorial with a 'chorus' presenting contrasting interjections to a repeated statement (see Ex.30).

(Ex. 30)



Ex.30. 'Folk Prelude' from *Four African Sketches* (1980) – Charles Camilleri (Cramer 1980). Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

The folkloric nature of Camilleri's pieces links together ethnic influences with those of folk traditions in general. Several composers of guitar music have sought musical inspiration from the complex anthropological web of folk sources, among them Colin Downs and Bernard Stevens. Both composers take specific folk melodies as foundations upon which to build their compositions. Bernard Stevens's *Ballad Op.45* (1971) comprises an introduction, a setting of the Somerset folk-song 'The Bramble Briar', and a musical elaboration of the original ballad-like lyric of the folk-song.⁴

Colin Downs's treatment of two French songs ('Moi je filais ma quenouille' and 'Allons beau rossignol') in his *Mosaic* (1977) is more strikingly original in its conception. The composer explains that the two songs were chosen 'one for its rhythmic character, the other for the melodic and ornamental qualities. Throughout the work these two contrasted ideas constantly vary and cross refer, giving the piece a fragmentary cohesion with the picture finally revealing itself with a complete statement of the principal melody at the end. The variations are so closely related that I considered one ordering of them irrelevant. I have, therefore, left it to the player to construct the piece into any one of the many possible versions of it as he/she sees fit. However, the opening and the ending must occur as stated and no link be placed next to another. Apart from that the sections and links may be repeated or omitted to create the desired effect.'⁵

Of all folk-derived art-forms, the most evocative of the guitar is Spanish flamenco music. Its historical predominance as an idiomatic and highly influential force has presented contemporary composers with a dilemma – to attempt to recapture the spirit of flamenco, without indulging in banal pastiche, or, to reject it outright.

A composer who has been successful in embracing elements of flamenco, which are neatly dovetailed into his musical *persona*, is Richard Rodney Bennett. An

example of this can be seen in the second movement of his *Sonata for Guitar* (1983), of which he has said:

'I remember thinking about the dark, recitative quality of some Spanish flamenco music, and though this doesn't sound that way, it was the sense which made me write the second movement as it is – that rather austere, passionate quality.'⁶

The influence of flamenco does not penetrate the thematic material of this movement; instead it creates a textural background of rasgueados and arpeggiated chords (Ex.31).

(Ex. 31)



Ex.31. 2nd Movement from *Sonata for Guitar* (1983) – Richard Rodney Bennett (Unpublished).

The result of this is that when Ex.31 is liberated from its original textural context it is able to take on a different musical function in the esoteric fabric of Bennett's collage-like fantasy-finale (Ex.32).

(Ex. 32)



Ex.32. 'Fantasy-Finale' from *Sonata for Guitar* (1983) – Richard Rodney Bennett (Unpublished).

The antithesis of Bennett's encompassment of flamenco influences is found in Peter Maxwell-Davies's *Hill Runes* (1981). The composer has explained the etymology of the work:

'I set myself the problem of writing a guitar solo quietly evocative in my mind of the almost "lunar" Scottish landscape in which I live, without overtones of Spain, so often evoked by the guitar, while at the same time writing idiomatically for the instrument.'⁷

Maxwell-Davies's bleak musical landscape is generated at the outset of the piece (Ex.33) and represents a completely fresh approach to guitar sonority.

(Ex.33)



Ex.33. Adagio from *Hill Runes* (1981) – Peter Maxwell-Davies (Boosey & Hawkes, 1981). Reproduced by kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Alberto Ginastera's monumental Guitar Sonata Op.47 (1976) homogenises a prodigious assortment of folklorical derivations.⁸ Ginastera has said:

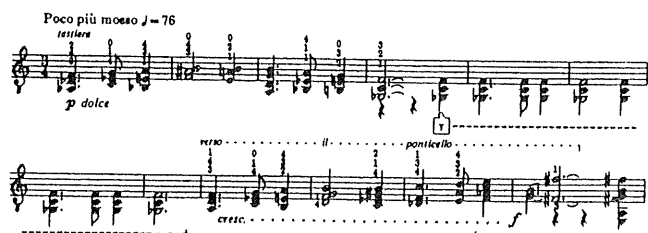
'I compose usually pieces for instruments according to two series: "Pampeanas" and "Punenás"; the first ones are inspired on the music of the Pampa and the others on the music of the Andean plateau.'⁹

In the Sonata, Ginastera has integrated both these concepts: the first movement is based on the Puna¹⁰ and the second and fourth movements derive from the Pampa.¹¹ Julian Bream has said of the work:

'It comes from a composer who's steeped to some extent in his country's folklore, and yet it's not at all self-conscious in that way. It grabs hold of very folklorical ideas in a very confident and buoyant way and actually transcends them. It is also, musically speaking, very compressed. The musical hub is very concentrated.'¹²

The first movement exploits a 'vidala', a slow and generally minor-keyed Quechua Indian song from north-western Argentina which employs the basic rhythmic motif (insert dotted crotchet, quaver, crotchet). (See Ex.34).

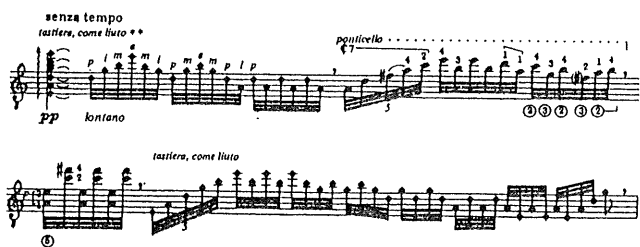
(Ex. 34)



Ex.34. I 'Esordio' from *Sonata for Guitar* Op.47 (1976) – Alberto Ginastera (Boosey & Hawkes 1981). Reproduced by kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

However, the most intriguing use of folk-like material occurs in the second movement, 'Scherzo Fantastico'. Towards the end of this movement the music that the Wagnerian character Sixtus Beckmesser plays on his lute in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* 'appears as a phantasmagoria'¹³ (Ex. 35).

(Ex. 35)




Ex.35. II 'Scherzo' from *Sonata for Guitar* Op.47 (1976) – Alberto Ginastera (Boosey & Hawkes 1981). Reproduced by kind permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.


This presents a provocative paradox: in the third act of *Die Meistersinger*, Beckmesser attempts to fuse his


traditional folk-like strophic song-accompaniment (Ex.35) with the 'modern', irregular metre of Walther's poem¹⁴, with disastrous effects. Conversely Ginastera is successful in amalgamating Beckmesser's musical material into the contemporary musical language of his *Sonata for Guitar*.

1. The scale is associated with the 'gamelan gong', 'gamelan gong kebyar', 'gamelan pelegongan' and other ensembles.
2. An example of a pentatonic melodic line is found in the 'Hunting Song of the Mambuti Pygmies' (transcription 14 from Rose Brandel – *The Music of Central Africa* (Martinus Nijhoff 1961).
3. Rose Brandel – *The Music of Central Africa* (Martina Nijhoff 1961, p.15).
4. 'The Bramble Briar' was collected by Cecil Sharp in Somerset in 1904. The story was also used by G. Boccaccio, Hans Sachs and J. Keats.
5. The composer's preface to *Mosaic* (1977) – Colin Downs (Musical New Services 1978).
6. 'Reflections on Richard Rodney Bennett's *Sonata for Guitar*' – Lance Bosman (Guitar International, November 1985).
7. Programme notes to the first performance of *Hill Runes* – Dartington, August 1981.
8. Although Alberto Ginastera was born in Argentina, his parents were Spanish and Italian, and at the time of composing his Sonata he was living in Geneva. Therefore the work can be classified 'European'.
9. Quoted from the composer's correspondence with the guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima in 'Ginastera's Sonata' by Richard Stover (Classical Guitar, April 1986).
10. Puna is the name given to the culture of the tribal Indians who dwell in the high, cold, dry plateaux of the mountainous region of South America.
11. Pampa is the gaucho culture developed on the expansive grassy plains of Argentina and Chile.
12. Taken from the writer's interview with Bream at the Royal Academy of Music, May 1987.
13. Composer's preface to *Sonata for Guitar* Op.47 (1976) – Alberto Ginastera (Boosey & Hawkes 1981).
14. Beckmesser stole Walther's poem, believing it to have been written by Hans Sachs.



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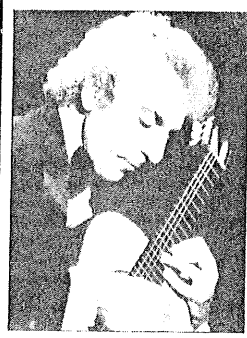




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