INNOVATIONS
IN EUROPEAN GUITAR COMPOSITIONS OF THE 1970s AND 1980s

BY STEPHEN GOSS

PART 1: STORYTELLING

'The guitar is a "knowing" or "knowledgeable" instrument, with many limitations but also many unexplored spaces and depths within these limits. It possesses a richness of sound capable of embracing everything one might find in a gigantic contemporary orchestra; but one has to start from silence in order to notice this; one has to pause, and completely exclude noise.'

H. W. Henze

Henze's postulation implicitly poses an intrinsic question — why, after the guitar's long history, are composers only now realising the sonoral potentials of the instrument?

This untapped store of sonorities lies mainly in the field of timbre, and John Schneider has indicated that of "the five musical parameters — pitch, loudness, duration, location and timbre — Western instrumental music has paid least attention to timbre. In many other cultures, however, timbre is of paramount importance." 2

Indeed, Western composers did not exploit timbre for its own sake until the beginning of the present century. An early example is the 'Farben' movement of Schoenberg's Five pieces for orchestra (1909), in which subtle orchestral changes occur during the course of a single chord. Schoenberg named this technique 'Klangfarbenmelodie' (melody of the tone colours) in his Harmonielehre (1911).

However, it was not until after the Second World War, when the aesthetic climate had changed considerably, that timbre became the dominant feature of musical expression, manifesting itself in the two most influential compositional techniques of the day — total serialism and electronic music. Suddenly, new instrumental contrasts became of paramount importance, and the guitar was called upon to meet various timbral requirements in ensemble pieces such as Boulez's Le Marteau sans Maître (1954). For the first time in the guitar's history non-specialist composers of note were writing solo and ensemble works for the instrument. In the 1960s the guitar's musical personality became more diversified. One general development, that was an outgrowth of the avant-garde movements of the fifties, was the exploration of the guitar as a source of non-traditional sound material. Meanwhile, as a result of the renewed interest in the instrument, traditional composers were also finding the guitar a satisfying medium for their expressive needs.

In the last 15 experimental techniques introduced in the 1960s have been refined and developed by composers to meet their more advanced expression requirements. On account of this new and extensive lexicon of timbral resources, composers are now able to assimilate numerous external stimuli and influences in their compositions for guitar.

This series of articles explores the contemporary guitar repertoire (post-1970) and illustrates how the incorporation of outside influences has nurtured the development of compositional techniques.

THE USE of a more comprehensive timbral palette has enabled composers of guitar music to probe into the realm of musical realism, either through the simple imitation of acoustic phenomena, or by the intricate colouring and elaboration of an explicit programme. The complex philosophical problem of realism in music has been expounded elsewhere by Carl Dahlhaus. 3

Realism through direct imitation takes on two basic guises: the nemesia of the other musical instruments and the recreation of extra-musical sounds ('Tonmalerei'), sometimes, especially in its less subtle manifestations, described as 'naturalistic' by historians such as Hermann Kretzschmar and Hugo Riemann.

In Malcolm Arnold's Fantasy for Guitar Op. 107 (1971) the performer has to simulate the sound of a snare drum (Ex.1) by pulling the 6th string over the 5th string and holding both strings down at the sixth fret; when the 6th string is plucked the effect is made.

(Ex.1)

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The same effect is exploited to more ambitious proportions in a work by Nikita Koshkin (Ex.2):

(Ex.2)

A very theatrical example of musical imitation occurs in David Bedford’s *A Horse, His Name was Hunry Fencewaver Walkins* (1973). The guitarist is instructed to ‘Walk to Double Bass player. Give him/her plectrum. Take Bass bow.’ Then the two instrumentalists swap sound-producing roles (Ex.3).


In another of David Bedford’s colourful pieces an example of ‘naturalistic’ imitation is notated in a particularly novel but apt manner (Ex.4):


A more sophisticated example exists in *L’Aube du Dernier Jour* (1980) by Francis Keynans. A prisoner awaits his execution in a cell; the story unfolds with the ticking of a clock, the chiming of the fateful hour followed by the footsteps of an approaching guard and the opening of the cell door.\(^4\) The work concludes with an accelerando (increase in heart-beat rate) and the descent of the primed guilloine.

The use of musical onomatopoeia is the most obvious technique employed to create the illusion of realism in music. However, through the manipulation of a literary programme, composers have transcended mere mimicism. The tendency for people to perceive reality as a series of separate events or adventures has been suggested by Jean-Paul Sartre\(^5\) who concludes that:

‘A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through these stories; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.’\(^6\)

An example of this form of realism can be observed in Hans Werner Henze’s *El Cimarrón* (1970), which is a setting of extracts from the autobiography of a Cuban ex-slave, Esteban Montejo, for baritone, flute, guitar and percussion. The text is semi-sung while the instrumental backdrop helps to achieve the colourful revivalization of Montejo’s exotic adventures. The overt lavishness of Henze’s aural depiction demands a wealth of new guitar sonorities, in addition to the sound that the guitarist has to produce by playing percussion instruments (Ex.5) and by vocalising various effects.

Ex.5. ‘IX Die Maschinen’ from *El Cimarrón* (1970) – Hans Werner Henze. Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers, Schott & Co. Ltd. (1972).\(^7\)

The Cuban composer/guitarist Leo Brouwer ‘helped with the composition of (El Cimarrón) by coming along with new ideas about extending the sound of the guitar.’\(^8\) Among the more iconoclastic techniques utilised are: the use of a cello bow (Ex.6), which helps in the ‘description of the landscape of Cuba.’\(^9\)

And the exploitation of the exaggerated dynamics and quarter-tones in an extended passage for solo guitar representing the transfer from the African cultures to the Caribbean. In section VI, ‘Geister’ (Ghosts), there is an interesting use of aleatoricism. (Ex.7).


In El Cimarrón, Henze has attempted to achieve realism through the musical representation of an explicit, factual narrative; in contrast, Nikita Koshkin, in his suite The Prince’s Toys Op.20 (1980) for solo guitar, has tried to make a fictional tale of enchantment more ‘realistic’ through musical translation. Koshkin’s programme dictates the overall form of his large-scale suite, which comprises specific musical character studies of the prince and each of his toys, followed by a finale (Theme and Variations). The ‘theme’ of the finale is entitled ‘The Prince’, and the ensuing variations portray the mercurial metamorphosis of the prince’s character as he becomes involved with each of his toys in succession. The finale, far from functioning tautologically, casts new light on both prince and toys now inextricably linked in an orgiastically enchanting fantasy world. Throughout the work the musical language remains direct and owes a good deal to Mussorgsky; however, there is much innovative and imaginative writing for the guitar. The illusion of automated animation is achieved ingeniously in ‘The Mechanical Monkey’ (Ex.8 and 9).


* = Right hand works as left hand does – that is, to tap the appointed place (the 11th fret) with i and m, while at the same time the left hand strikes the 9th fret by turns.
Towards the end of ‘The Prince’s Coach’ a horse is heard neighing and then trotting into the distance (repeated tambora anapestis) (Ex.10).


Finally, the coda of the last movement incorporates many fascinating effects and notations (Ex.11).


In recent years programmaticism has provided a useful skeletal framework for many composers to experiment with larger-scale musical structures in their compositions for guitar. This has catalysed the regression of the ‘miniaturist’ mentality of composers active earlier in the century, and helped expand the range and scale of musical expression possible on the guitar.

3. Musikalischer Realismus: Zur Musikgeschichte des 19 Jahrhunderts (R. Piper & Co. Verlag, Munich 1982). Professor Dahlhaus warns that: “The attempt to formulate a concept of realism which will serve the purposes of the history of the arts courts the alternative dangers of falling victim to a philosophical naivety which accepts without question an everyday conception of reality of becoming lost in cerebrations which end by allowing the whole concept to disintegrate’. (From the translation by Mary Whittall, p.16).
4. These effects are achieved as follows: Ticking clock – by lightly touching the 1st and 2nd string at the 3rd fret and plucking in the normal way. Clock chime – by preparing the strings for the snare drum effect but plucking the 5th string instead of the 6th (very near to the bridge to obtain maximum partials). Footsteps – by striking the table of the guitar. Opening door – by sliding the thumbnail along the 6th string.
7. Percussion instruments used by the guitarist in the Henze quotation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Notation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 con bili (high, medium, low)</td>
<td>🎹️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooden sallet</td>
<td>🎹️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bundle of hanging</td>
<td>🎹️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bamboo sticks</td>
<td>🎹️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bundle</td>
<td>🎹️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>** = Play between soundhole and bridge. ** = Slide the thumbnail along the 6th string from bridge to nut.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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11. Nikita Koshkin: The Prince’s Toys (1980) (The Gendai Guitar Company, 1983). The programme of the suite is as follows: “A young prince tries to amuse himself with the toys, but they are lifeless and he is in distress. ‘If they were alive, how wonderful it would be’, thought the prince. Being capricious he throws them to

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the floor. At this moment a miracle occurs: the toys suddenly become alive and not only that but they grow to an enormous size. The prince is startled that such a transformation has taken place. As the toys start to tease him, they involve the prince in play with them. The prince is delighted, he laughs and is happy. At the moment of the highest gaiety a fairy suddenly appears. The prince, bewitched, sees her and cannot take his eyes away. As the fairy approaches the wall, a door appears in it. The fairy opens the door and all the toys disappear one after another. The prince follows them. The door slowly closes after the prince and it vanishes as if it had never been there.’ (From the foreword by Nikita Koshkin).


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**STEPHEN GOSS** was born in Dyfed in 1964. At the age of 16 he won a scholarship to study guitar, violin and composition at Wells Cathedral Music School. He went on to Bristol University, where he studied composition with Robert Saxton and Derek Bourgeois, and won several awards and prizes for his guitar playing, including the Hubert Byard Prize and the Britton Scholarship.

After graduating in 1985, he furthered his studies at the Royal Academy of Music with guitarist Michael Lewin and composer Edward Gregson. He won the Julian Bream Prize in 1986 and is the only guitarist to date to be awarded the London University M.Mus degree in musical performance and related studies.

Since leaving the RAM Stephen has performed widely, giving concerts on London’s South Bank and at numerous festivals and music societies. He has worked with a wide range of composers including Toru Takemitsu, Hans Werner Henze, Robert Saxton, Raymond Warren, John W. Duarte and Gilbert Biberian.

Stephen’s own compositions have been performed extensively. His orchestral song cycle ‘Hymnen an die Nacht’ was recently premiered at St John’s Smith Square, London.

He has received much critical acclaim for his recitals with mezzo-soprano Jenevora Williams and with the TETRA Guitar Quartet.

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