

How to Write for Classical Guitar

Saturday, 12 May 2012

How to Write for the Classical Guitar

Preface

Introduction

The guitar often finds itself on the periphery of the modern classical music scene, and the repertoire for the instrument often reflects this. Much the music for the guitar is written by guitarist/composers and could be described as 'Gebrauchsmusik', that is, music which is well written for the instrument, and is as such useful for educational purposes, but has little artistic value and is generally not recognised by the mainstream classical music establishment.^[1] The other main chunk of the guitars repertoire is taken up with arrangements of music written for other instruments. It is possible that, in general, most composers tend to shy away from writing for guitar as they are unfamiliar with the limitations of the instrument, and the rewards of writing an opera or a string quartet are much greater.

For this project I wanted to outline the possibilities for guitar writing and explain the mechanics of guitar music in such a way as someone who was completely unfamiliar with the guitar would be able to understand. To do this, I commissioned two composers at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Mike MacLennan and Declan Kolakowski, who had not written for guitar before, in a hope that their pieces would allow me to look through their eyes, and see my instrument as if I had never seen it before.

It was important to me that they had not written for guitar before not only as I needed to see how someone with no knowledge of the guitar would approach writing for it, but also because historically the most unique and interesting music for the guitar was written by people who were unfamiliar with the instrument. Examples include Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal* and Alberto Ginestera's *Sonata for Guitar*, and the works of Heitor Villa Lobos and Manuel Maria Ponce written for Segovia in the early twentieth century. This is possibly because they were not allowing worries about playability limit the flow of their musical imagination, as Britten has said about the writing process for *Nocturnal*.^[2] I wanted them to think this way, so I tried to only answer direct questions that they had, and not suggest any particular tricks or ideas, lest I unwittingly lead them down the road of writing a reworked collage of music from other pieces. This I think is unfortunately common, and in some modern guitar music, you can almost guess which pieces the composer was listen to while conceiving their own piece. For instance, the final movement of John Buckley's *Guitar Sonata No. 1* contains many of the same harmonic and rhythmic ideas which are found in Alberto Ginestera's *Sonata for Guitar*.

It is my hope that this manual, and the music created in its cause, will inspire other composers to write for the guitar, as the guitar will only be able to rise in stature in the classical music scene if it has a repertoire comparable to other solo instruments. Julian Bream wrote a similar article in 1957, and it is safe to say that no one in the late twentieth century inspired more great composers to write for the instrument than he did.

Initial Music to Listen to

When I first met both Mike and Declan, I gave them the same list of pieces to listen to. My goal was that they would give a flavour of what the kind of guitar music I enjoy sounds like, but I was quick to stress that I was looking to avoid the kind of writing where these pieces would form a kind of scaffold on which the composers could place their ideas. I wanted them both to feel free to write whatever they liked as I wanted pieces that were personal to them and in their own style, and it would be my job to assess the workability of those ideas,

Blog Archive

▼ 2012 (1)

▼ May (1)

[How to Write for the Classical Guitar](#)

About Me

[tomasodurcain](#)

[View my complete profile](#)

rather than they play it safe. Nonetheless, I was careful to pick pieces that I not only liked, but thought were well written for the instrument. That list was as follows:

Nocturnal after John Dowland – Benjamin Britten
Elogio de la Danza/Sonata – Leo Brouwer
Duo Canzoni Lidie – Nuccio D'Angelo
Guitar Sonata – Alberto Ginastera
Suite Compostelana Mvts 1-3 – Federico Mompou

The *Nocturnal* I paid particular attention to, as I feel it is one of the best examples of modern classical guitar music, and one of the few pieces where it could be argued that the composer didn't worry about the playability of the music, rather wrote what he felt was right and left it up to the performer to find the right way of making it work. Leo Brouwer is arguably one of the best living classical guitar composers and possibly the only one to find the right balance of perfectly written music in a technical sense, while still being able to maintain a sense of interest and innovation. This is because he is both a trained guitarist and a trained composer, a relative rarity. Alberto Ginastera's *Sonata* was one of the first avant-garde pieces written for the guitar, and its influence can be seen in many modern pieces, such as John Buckley's *Guitar Sonatas* and much of the work of Nikita Koshkin, in particular *The Prince's Toys*. The sheer range of advanced techniques utilised in the music meant that I felt it would be a good idea to make its presence known to show some of the guitar's other capabilities. The other pieces don't hold any special significance in the guitar repertoire; however they are very comfortable to play both musically and technically, so I included them.

It should be noted that in his article '*How to Write for Guitar*',^[3] Julian Bream suggests the following reading list:

J.S. Bach – Complete Lute Works
Heitor Villa-Lobos – Complete Etudes/Preludes
Fernando Sor – Complete Studies
Mario-Castelnuovo Tedesco – Sonata
Manuel De Falla – Homenaje pour le Tombeau de Claude Debussy

While by Bream's own admission this list is rather conservative, there is still something that can be learned from these pieces. In particular, the Bach lute works which are excellent representations of the possibilities for counterpoint on the guitar, and the Villa-Lobos Etudes, which are probably the most exhaustive collection of studies written for the guitar, as they cover almost all possible techniques and ideas for the instrument. I feel it is worth noting as well that two of the pieces I suggested, *Nocturnal* and Brouwer's *Sonata*, were written for Julian Bream, and it is possible that this list was the list he gave to these composers prior to writing.

The Pieces

Declan's Process

When I first met Declan after giving him the above list, I played him *Nocturnal* and *Elogio de la Danza*, and then answered some questions he had about the guitar. I was wary of volunteering too much unasked for information, as I didn't want to inadvertently steer him in any direction. About the Britten he mainly had questions about notation, such as the piece's unusual stave layout, and some of the more guitar-specific notations for frets and right hand finger indications. I told him he need not worry about these too much, as I would work them out in my own time. He also wanted to know about the possibilities and limitations of harmonics and how repetitions on a single note may be played, both of which I will go into in more detail later. The main reason for playing the Brouwer was to show some of the tonal and percussive techniques on the guitar which I felt he may not be too familiar with.

The first draft Declan sent me, *Dances of A Very Cemetery Cockroach*, was envisaged as a parody of nineteenth century dance suites, and contained a few issues with range and slides, but was generally playable. Eventually this idea was scrapped as Declan felt that he would be unable to properly do it justice in the short time of the piece. The second draft, *Marsyas Lies*, was altogether a more complete work, and was inspired by the Greek myth of Marsyas, a flute player who loses his flute and is condemned to the underworld after losing a bet with Apollo. Thus the piece takes the form of a lament which chronicles Marsyas's descent into the underworld and the realisation of his greatest fear; the public's endless, mindless listening to his music. The title comes from Marsyas's need to lie both about his own abilities and the impact of the gods on his life, and is also a play on the word 'lyre' a Greek plucked string instrument. Thus uncertainty forms a key component of the piece's harmony and structure. Declan also told me that he tried to write some sections of the piece as if he was writing for a flute, to keep the connection.

Technically, asides for two problematic bars at fifty-five and fifty-six, there was very little that I had to make changes to, and even then those were quite minor and will be gone into in detail later. In those problematic bars, the ascending thirds where to fast to cleanly articulate, so I substituted them with a tremolando slide, to give a similar effect of approaching climax. I will elaborate on the exact nature of the technical issues and my solutions for them in detail later on.

Mike's Process

When I first met Mike, his main concern was with the sliding effect on the guitar. Most of the guitar music that he had heard was littered with audible slides in many places, and he wondered was this something that was inherent and unavoidable in guitar playing. I explained to him that, in most cases, sliding is actively avoided on the guitar as it can be noisy, and if it is a specific effect that he desires it should be notated in the score. Unfortunately the pressures of time meant that I was unable to play for him, but I gave him the same list of pieces that I gave to Declan, and I outlined some of his concerns and issues that had come up, such as the number of workable voices in harmonic playing and issues with range and spanning. I also had to explain to Mike about the notation of guitar music, as he had expected it to be across two staves. He commented to me that the look of guitar music on one staff is to him very crowded. In this vain he wondered also if repeated chords are notated literally, as in a series of clumps of notes. I explained that this is usually the case, however some composers may use a type of shorthand, such as rhythm patterns with the chord just notated once, if they so wish.

The first draft that Mike sent to me was generally quite playable; however there were some problems with the playability of the harmonic chords (Ex.1).

Ex.1, MacLennan, *Untitled (Draft)*, Bars 1, 4 and 11, Harmonic Chords



In the final version, *Bipolar*, this problem was solved by playing the A-flat in the first two chords as a fretted note, while having the others as open harmonics. This produces a similar effect, while also allowing me to add vibrato to the note. For the final chord, Mike thought it best to play the whole chord up the octave, and use harmonics for the A and G while using a closed note for the E-flat in the same way.

This piece proved to be difficult musically as there were no dynamics marked in the score. I made a decision early on to let the notes ring across one another as much as possible, while still recognising the rests. This had the effect of thickening the texture, while also making the harmony clearer. Unlike Declan's piece, where I added in slurs myself in most cases, Mike had notated slurs in his music which I made a point to observe. The slur from an A to an E in bar forty-six stretched the limits of my hand, but slurs of this size can have an interesting character so I decided to leave it in and endeavour to play it correctly.

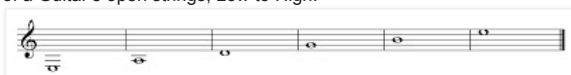
Structurally, Mike told me that the piece came about when he noticed that most modern atonal music also had rather abstract and disjointed rhythms. Thus the rhythms from bars one to twenty-five are identical to those found in bars twenty-six to fifty. The first half is overall quite dissonant, while the second half is altered slightly to use more conventional harmonies while keeping the exact same rhythmic structure as the previous section. Again I will elaborate on the exact nature of the issues with this piece and my solutions to them later on.

Orchestration

Range

The tuning of a standard guitar is, low to high, EADGBE written as shown (Ex.2).

Ex.2, Tuning of a Guitar's open strings, Low to High.



It is important to remember though that the guitar is a transposing instrument, and that those written pitches will actually sound an octave lower, thus giving it a range quite similar to that of a cello, however with higher pitched resonances and overtones giving the illusion of an overall higher range.[4]

The range of the guitar is actually the sum of the ranges of all the strings as shown (Ex.3).[5]

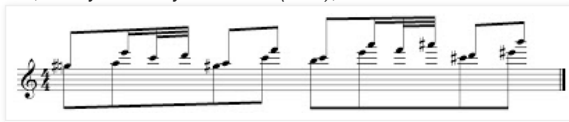
Ex.3, Ranges of the notes on each individual string.



The high note for guitars varies, in that it can occasionally go up to a C (which mine does) however a lot of guitars will only go up to a B so it is safer to work within these limits unless specifically told by the performer that this C is possible. This can be seen in early drafts of *Marsyas Lies* which at its climax go up to the C-sharp above this, which is a semitone too high for my guitar. Upon meeting Declan for the first time, in order to explain to him the range of how to write for the guitar I used the analogy of writing for a one handed pianist. In retrospect I feel that this is not as accurate a description as I thought at the time, however there is still some truth to it as the range of notes that can be played simultaneously on a guitar is limited to the span of one hand, rather than any combination of notes on the fret board. Indeed this was a concern that Declan voiced to me prior to writing, particularly in larger chords.

The lower strings do not sound very good high up the fingerboard, so I advised that it is unwise to do six string chords very high up the neck. The overall range of a guitar is three octaves and a fifth, however the notes above the high G on the first string are of a lower quality, and high complicated passagework can sound thin and unconvincing here, so thought must be given when placing notes here.[6] An example of this is in bar 30 of Declan's first draft, where there is a close harmony counterpoint quite high up the neck. Although this is technically possible, it is very impractical as this high up the neck the body of the guitar gets in the way of the hand, slowing down the overall speed of movement (Ex.4).

Ex.4, Kolakowski, *A Very Cemetery Cockroach (Draft)*, Bar 30

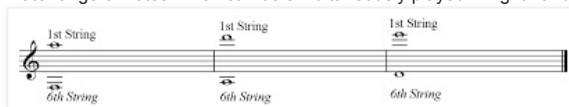


I met Mike for the first time after Declan's first draft, so I voiced these concerns to him, and explained that contrapuntally middle range diads (thirds and fifths, tenths and twelfths for example) are very easy, however as you move in either direction with the notes (seconds and octaves, anything with a span of two octaves or above) this kind of passagework becomes very difficult at speed. That isn't to say that these intervals are unplayable, but great care must be taken with the context of their use. In general very large intervals should be avoided unless one of the open strings is involved.

Span

The span of the left hand on a guitar is generally about 5 of 6 frets, however this amount will increase as the hand moves up the neck, and high chords can be played with open basses easily (Ex.5)

Ex.5, Approximate range of notes which can be simultaneously played in right hand



The climactic chord in *Marsyas Lies* is wider than this, spanning an E-flat to a B, however it just about works in this context as there is time to get in and out of it. I play the chord at the end of the above video, and as you can see it is a massive stretch. I would be very careful to think of the context of using a stretch this wide, and only use it if it is absolutely unavoidable. Issues with spanning can be seen in early drafts of *Marsyas lies*, where in bar 55 there is a large gap between the low F and the high A-sharp's and D-sharp's in the chords, (Ex.6),

Ex.6, Kolakowski, *Marsyas Lies* (Draft), Bars 55 and 56



as well as in places in *Dances of A Very Cemetery Cockroach* where the same problem occurs (Ex.7).

Ex.7, Kolakowski, *Dances of A Very Cemetery Cockroach* (Draft), Bar 17



A similar problem is encountered in bar 46 of *Marsyas Lies* where the C is indicated to be sustained over a low F-sharp. This is unfortunately not possible, so the C must be cut short in order to reach the F-sharp in time (Ex.8).

Ex.8, Kolakowski, *Marsyas Lies* (Draft), Bars 46 and 47



Notation

Guitar music is usually written on a single staff, which a lot of composers seem unfamiliar with, certainly Mike and Declan were. Britten also frequently notates his guitar music across two staves. Although Mike thought that one staff looked cluttered, it is by far more common and most guitarists will not be used to reading on two staves, thus the learning process will be slowed, as it is not really practical or useful to practice the two staves separately. Chords are also usually written out in full even if they are repeated; although some shorthand is occasionally used if the chord is static while the rhythm changes. Again I wouldn't be too worried about having the score look crowded in comparison to piano scores for example, as guitarists will be well used to reading them. Arpeggiation of a chord, as opposed to the chord being played all at the same time, is indicated in the same way as it would be on a piano, with a wavy line and arrow indicating the direction of the break.

On a guitar, the fingerings for the left hand are indicated with the

numbers one to four for the first to little finger, while the letters PIMA indicate thumb, first, middle and ring fingers on the right hand respectively. These indications can be left to the discretion of the performer if the composer is unfamiliar with the guitar. The position of notes on the neck can also be shown by indicating the desired fret using roman numerals, III for the third fret for example, or by indicating which string the note should be played on with a number from one to six in a circle.^[7] This is something which a composer may like to give thought to, as most notes on the guitar can be played in several different positions, each with a different quality to the others.

Barring

Another important part of guitar playing to take into account is the grand barre, where the performer covers all or half of the span of a single fret with his first finger in order to create an artificial movable nut. This bar is indicated with a capital C, so a barre on the third fret would be indicated by CIII. A half barre would have a vertical line through the C. Some performers are able to use an angled barre, where the first finger covers the higher strings, but is still able to fret notes on adjacent frets on lower strings, however this is a very specific technique that many performers (myself included) will not be able to do and as such should not be used unless the performer shows himself able to do so.^[8] When using a grand barre, the remaining fingers can fret up to four frets higher than the barre itself, and barres should be avoided above the tenth fret, as above here the body of the guitar prevents the hand from being able to get into the right position to perform the barre.^[9]

Musical Writing

Harmony

When voicing harmony on a guitar, it is important to remember the limitations of the left hand. It is advisable not to go beyond three notes for contrapuntal playing, as four notes or more will just sound like a succession of chords, however if this is the desired effect then it is perfectly acceptable to do so. If this size harmony is absolutely necessary, then tempo should be taken into account as this kind of playing is not possible at fast speeds. It should be noted however that all five or six string chords on a guitar will be slightly arpeggiated, as the right hand only uses four fingers to pluck strings.^[10] If repeated and rapid chord changes are required, then it is best to keep to four notes, or even three if very fast, to avoid running into problems, and if a tremolando effect is required then the notes of the chord must fall on adjacent strings or the click of the muted middle string will ring out.^[11]

Counterpoint

Two part harmony is generally comfortable and quite common in guitar writing, however exclusively parallel or contrary motion is very difficult as you quickly run into spanning problems. It is acceptable in most cases to simplify the accompaniment, and have a discreet and occasional third middle part to punctuate the harmony.^[12] This was a technique which Declan used in the middle section of *Marsyas Lies*, and he also informed me that to avoid issues he restricted himself to three part writing as much as possible throughout the piece. It is a good idea if writing multiple part lines that the bass is far away from the remaining notes, as the major third between the second and third strings facilitates easy triadic playing, while the gap between the bass and everything else gives the chord certain richness.^[13] Triads in the low positions can also sound quite rich, however in chamber music these can get lost very easily so they are best to be avoided in this context.^[14] Julian Bream advises looking to the works of Bach for instruction of how to write harmonically for the guitar:

A Detailed study of the unaccompanied violin sonatas would serve admirably as a guide to the application of harmony and counterpoint to the guitar; better still, compare Bach's own lute arrangements of the G minor fugue from the first Violin Sonata or of the whole C minor cello suite, and one will notice that with the added advantage of extra strings he has slightly elaborated the harmony and in some cases developed the counterpoint.^[15]

An example of good harmonic writing for guitar is the arrangements of Bach's *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro*, which when moved from its original key to D Major, provides a strong example of what would be the limit of complexity for harmonic writing on the guitar.^[16]

Tonality

The choice of key is important on the guitar, and many pieces are either written or rearranged so that they are in the keys of A, E, D, G, C, F or their tonic minors, and the natural resonances and open notes of the guitar can be taken advantage of.^[17] Because of this atonal pieces can sometimes be problematic on the guitar, however they are certainly workable and there are a number of fine examples on atonal works in the guitars repertoire.^[18] A technique which some composers use, most notably Villa-Lobos, is to use chords which combine fretted notes with open strings, so the fretted notes can move while the open strings remain constant, thus creating a series of easily movable chords which will each have their own harmonic flavour.^[19] Thought must be given to using this however, as it can sound a bit naive, and is a greatly overused trick in modern guitar music. Arpeggios are possible in almost any combination on the guitar, particularly if the notes of the chord fall on adjacent strings, as the first second and third fingers of the right hand can handle the treble strings while the thumb takes the basses.^[20] Villa-Lobos' *Etude No. 1* is a good example of the kind of arpeggio playing possible on the guitar.

Colour

Tone

Texture and colour are vital to guitar music. As Julian Bream says:

The most important thing to bear in mind when writing for an instrument is the texture and character of its sound. The guitar is more sensitive and intimate than almost any other instrument, and therefore demands from the composer great imagination and feeling for colour – especially since it is nearly always solo, and succeeds or fails purely on its own merits of musical expression.^[21]

Indeed, Declan informed me after the completion of his piece that, in the absence of any other information to latch on to, he primarily thought tonally and texturally when writing his music. The guitar is capable of making a variety of different timbres and as Bream says above this should be taken into account when writing music for it. Often the type of tone used for different kinds of music is left to the discretion of the performer, but I feel it can help with the writing process if the composer at least has this in mind when creating the piece. I made sure to emphasise this point and explain it to both Mike and Declan so they could be aware of it for their music.

In general, tone is decided by what part of the string the right hand plucks. Closer to the fingerboard will create a warmer, fuller sound, but can at times sound woolly and undefined, as well as making the music harder to play as the strings will vibrate more in this position. This is indicated by writing *Tasto* above the part of the music meant to be played this way. If an extreme version is required, then you must write *Sul Tasto* which indicates the performer must pluck the strings over the fingerboard. By playing away from the fingerboard, closer to the bridge, this will have a clear, sharp but thin sound which can be effective in small amounts. This is indicated by writing *Ponti* or if a very sharp sound is required then the composer should write *Metalico* and the performer will pluck right next to the bridge. If these are not indicated then the performer will use a natural hand position, which is just to the right of the sound hole, over the rosette.

In the above video, I play the same passage in five different positions to show the subtle tonal differences that are available on the guitar. First I play in a normal position, then *Tasto* (0.13), *Sul Tasto* (0.25), *Ponti* (0.38), and finally *Metalico* (0.50).

Dynamics

The dynamic range of the guitar is generally not a major cause for concern on its own, though the guitar is a notoriously quiet instrument with a small dynamic range, a fact which must be taken into consideration if the guitar is in a piece with other instruments. It can be a good idea to remember this so that pieces are not conceived with the idea of tremendous volume as this will generally not be the case. Declan commented on this when he first heard me play *Marsyas Lies*, as he had overall envisaged the piece as louder than I was playing it, but he said that my more relaxed interpretation was fine by him as it was my reaction to the piece. Indeed he later commented to me that, in his opinion, the reason more people didn't write for guitar was because the instrument was so quiet that most composers won't know what to do with it, particularly in chamber music situations.

For safety, working within a dynamic limit of pp-ff is best as the subtle difference between any quieter or louder dynamics will not come across clearly on the guitar. Overall in *Marsyas Lies* Declan has gone for a much larger dynamic than this, going from ppppp-fffff, however I left this in as, although the differences between the large dynamics will be smaller than they would be on other instruments, this way of writing clearly shows the intent and helps with the interpretation. It is my job as a performer to put this intent across and try and make the dynamics relative to each other. Britten uses similarly wide dynamic ranges in his *Nocturnal after John Dowland*.

In the above video, I again play the same passage in several different ways in order to show the dynamic ranges of the guitar. First I play as softly as possible, then I play as loud as I am able to pluck (0.15), and finally I play as loudly as I can strum (0.26). Strumming can add extra volume to chordal passages, but sacrifices clarity of sound for this.

Harmonics

Natural Harmonics

Harmonics are part of the guitars repertoire which can be very useful. Open harmonics on the guitar can be played at the following pitches (Ex.9).

Ex. 9, Possible Open Harmonics on the Guitar



Position wise, this means that the twelfth fret plays harmonics an octave higher than the open pitch of the string, the seventh and nineteenth play pitches an octave and a fifth higher, and the fifth plays harmonics two octaves higher. Natural harmonics two octaves and a major third higher are also theoretically possible at the fourth, ninth and sixteenth frets, however these not as strong or clear and should be only used carefully, particularly not in fast passages, as it can be difficult to get the note to be louder than the sound of the string being

plucked.^[22] Harmonics are played by placing the finger over the metal of the desired frets on the guitar, and then raising the finger again after the note has been struck so that it resonates freely. These are easily played on the guitar, and rapid passagework is quite possible, as well as block chords using these notes, though care should be taken when creating chords that the stretches between frets are not too large.

In the above video, I play the opening section of *The Shannon Suite* by Ciaran Farrell to show the kind of melodic material that can be theoretically created using only open harmonics.

Artificial Harmonics

Most other notes on the guitars fingerboard can be played using artificial harmonics. This is where the left hand finger frets the note the octave below the desired pitch, and the right hand first finger hovers over the metal of the fret twelve frets above and plucks to create the harmonic. This process is quite awkward so the speed these can be performed at is limited, and the sound is generally thinner than that of natural harmonics.^[23] The range for artificial harmonics is slightly smaller than the range of the guitar itself (Ex.10).

Ex.10, Range of possible Artificial Harmonics



Problems with this can be seen in Bar 60 of *Marsyas Lies*, where the G is too low to play as a harmonic, and also in the third chord in Mike's first draft, where the C is too low. Also in this draft, there are problems with the chords, as chords are possible using the open harmonics given above; however chords are not possible using artificial harmonics. In this instance I decided to do whatever notes I could as natural harmonics, and fret the rest normally, thus creating a similar effect.

In the above video, I play a passage from the sixth movement of Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal* which exclusively uses artificial harmonics. This is about the limit of complexity of line that can be done in this manner, however it would be possible to play this section slightly faster than I play in this video.

Practical Harmonics

Sometimes natural harmonics can be used in place of regular notes in a piece to make fingering easier. As seen below, I used this in Bar 35 of *Marsyas*

Lies, as the chord here has too close a harmony to fret and keep the campanella effect, however if I play the D as a harmonic, then it will ring without me touching it leaving my hand free to fret the other notes in the chord. I did a similar thing at bar 49 with the low E in the accompaniment.

Harmonics Notation

Notation of harmonics is ambiguous, and there is no strict rule on how it is done. Declan chose to place a small circle above the note to indicate a harmonic, while Mike used a diamond shaped note head. Both of these are acceptable and are commonly used at the composers' discretion. Pitches can be ambiguous as well, as artificial harmonics are sometimes written at sounding pitch, and sometimes based on left hand position, i.e. down the octave, while natural harmonics are sometimes written at pitch, and sometimes written with the string and fret indicated but not the pitch (Ex.11)

Ex.11, Possible alternate notation of Open Harmonics



Given Declan and Mike's relative inexperience in this area, I took them to mean that the pitches written were the pitches which should sound. Declan in particular enjoyed the sound of the guitars harmonics, and made sure to work them into his piece as he thought they were much easier to hear than harmonics on other string instruments.

Guitar Specific Techniques

Glissandi

Glissandi on guitar are not as effective as they are on non fretted string instruments, but they can still be used if the composer so wishes, as Julian Bream says:

I would like to mention one other characteristic of guitar playing, known as the 'slide' or *Portamento*. Although this technique is often abused by instrumentalists, it can, when performed with sincere artistic ends, create a feeling of pathos and emotional intensity.^[24]

Sliding on the bass strings in particular should be treated with care, as the steel coating on these strings can create a loud scrape when slides are used, and on any string the sound of the finger crossing the metal frets will break the uninterrupted note which is possible on bowed instruments. Guitarists will generally avoid slides unless it is specifically notated as these noises are undesirable in guitar playing. Mike in particular wondered if this was something that he should notate or was it something inherent to guitar playing. This is notated on the score in the same way as for other instruments, with line linking one note to the next. Care must be taken by the composer though that the two notes of the slide occur on the same string, as slides to adjacent strings are not possible. Slides on more than one note are possible, however all the notes must move at the same time and in the same direction or there will be no discernable effect. Problems can be seen in *A Very Cemetery Cockroach* in the slides after

bar nine, as the slide on the G's here are not possible when the other fingers need to perform counterpoint, as the whole hand would need to move for an effective glissando (Ex. 12).

Ex.12, Kolakowski, *Dances of A Very Cemetery Cockroach (Draft)*, Bars 16 and 17



A problem also occurs at bar six where there is a slide on the low F. As this is the lowest fretted note on the guitar, it is impossible to slide any lower and no real glissando effect is possible. Slides can be added also as a form of legato to make fast playing easier. I did this in bar 56 of *Marsyas Lies*, as the rising scale in the thirds here was too fast to cleanly articulate, so doing the whole thing as a tremolando slide produced a much clearer effect.

The above video involves a wide variety of the possible slides on the guitar, in terms of length, distance and size of possible chords which can be moved.

Slurs

Other types of legato playing possible on the guitar are Hammer-ons and Pull-offs, which are performed essentially by plucking the string with the fretting hand. These can be used for faster and smoother passagework, however care must be taken as with the slides that the two notes are on the same string and are within the reach of the hand. The slur from A to E in *Bipolar* is just about the limit to the distance of my slurs (Ex.13).

Ex.13, MacLennan, *Bipolar*, Bar 46



Slurs cannot be done continuously forever though as the string must be made to vibrate again by the right hand.^[25] Notes meant to be played in this way are indicated with an arced line connecting them.

This above video, like the one for slides earlier, shows a variety of the possibilities for legato playing using Hammer-ons and Pull-offs.

Tremolo

When I first met Declan, he asked me how repetitions on a single note could be played on the guitar, as this was an idea he was working with at the

time. I explained to him about tremolo technique on the guitar, where the thumb plays a bass line, while the fingers rapidly play one note on the higher strings to give the impression of a sustained line. The melody in this case, can either be in the single note bass part or the sustained higher line.^[26] Although this is a nice technique, it should be used sparingly in larger pieces as it can get quite monotonous.

In the above video, I play the opening passage of *La Ultima Cancion* by Augustin Barrios Mangore, to give an idea of how tremolo technique is used on the guitar.

Pizzicato

Pizzicato technique on the guitar involves plucking the string while the right hand forms an artificial mute over the bridge, thus creating a sound very like the harp stop on a harpsichord which can be very effective on bass notes and on two or three note chords in the higher register.^[27] Declan told me he particularly wanted to include this effect in his piece as it was one that he was previously unfamiliar with. He also indicated in bar twenty-one of *Dances of A Very Cemetery Cockroach* that he wanted a snap effect on the note. This is known as a Bartok Pizzicato, and is performed by fretting the note normally with the left hand and pulling the string away from the guitar with the right so that it snaps against the fingerboard when released. It is notated by placing a circle with a half vertical line through it, much like the power symbol on a computer, above the note.

In the above video, I play a number of short passages to show what pizzicato technique on the guitar sounds like.

Percussive Techniques

A variety of percussive effects are possible on the guitar by striking different parts of its body with different parts of the hand. There is no set notation for doing such a thing, and if this effect is desired then a key must be done up by the composer so his intentions are clear, but the indication that the guitar must be struck is usually marked *Golpe*, and if pitches are to be held for whatever reason, resonance for example, then using an x instead of a note head can indicate that the pitches marked are percussive pitches rather than normally played ones. Ginastera's *Sonata for Guitar* has a number of fine examples of this kind of playing. The most common percussive effect is *Tambura*, where the performer frets notes normally, but strikes the strings close to the bridge to make the pitches vibrate. You can listen here to how this sounds when I play Manuel De Falla's *Millers Dance* entirely tambura.

Vibrato

Vibrato is generally left to the discretion of the performer, but the composer can if he wishes indicate that he wants no vibrato by writing *Senza Vibrato* in the normal way. Vibrato is possible on chords as well as on single notes, however not on open strings or open harmonics.

Scordatura

Though the guitar is usually tuned to EADGBE as mentioned earlier, scordatura tunings are possible and common. The most frequent is dropping the low E down a tone to D, to facilitate ease of creating fifths and octaves in the bass. Other altered tunings should only be attempted by experienced guitar composers, as these new tunings can have a dramatic effect on the playability of the pieces, and what would normally be easy to play can become very difficult. Nuccio D'Angelo's *Duo Canzoni Lidie* is tuned to E-Flat, A, D, G, B-Flat, E, and is a good example of how scordatura can create a whole new sound and resonance for the guitar.

Summation

The most recurring issues I had in working with these new pieces concerned span, harmonics and notation. Working within the ranges of notes that I marked earlier is very important, as no amount of practise can increase the stretch of a hand, and one would hope not to have to alter a beautiful melody for such a small issue. Harmonics must also be used with care, as their possibilities are relatively limited and specific. Great thought must be given to their use so that the ideas are within the guitar's possibility, particularly when artificial harmonics are being used, as both pieces contained harmonics that are not playable on the guitar. The notation is less important as long as the composers intent is clear, however it will save a great deal of time in the learning process if the score is laid out in a way that is similar to the guitar music that most guitarists will be used to reading. This must be kept in mind in particular if the composer is more used to reading harmonic music across two staves.

This process was very informative as to how a composer may look at the guitar. Both of these composers were much happier to write for the instrument in the knowledge that I would be able to proofread any work, therefore I can conclude that having a guitarists perspective on the piece can improve it greatly; as well as make the writing process less daunting. It is my hope that this blog will be able to act as a substitute to those composers who may be willing to write for guitar, but who have no guitarists nearby that they can call on for assistance. I plan fully to continue to speak to composers about writing for the instrument, and directing them towards this site for guidance, in the hope that they will do the same to others in similar situations in the future, thus leading to more new music and a richer repertoire for the guitar.

Bibliography

Adler, Samuel. *The Study of Orchestration*, 3rd ed. New York & London, Norton, 2002

Barrios, Agustin Mangore. *La Ultima Cancion*, ed. Raymond Burley. London, Schott, 1991

Berio, Luciano. *Berio's Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis*. Adershot, Ashgate, 2007

Blatter, Alfred. *Instrumentation and Orchestration*, 2nd ed. Belmont CA, Schirmer, 1997

Booth, Wayne C. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago. London, University of Chicago Press, 2008

Bream, Julian. 'How to Write for the Guitar'. *European Guitar Teachers Association UK Guitar Forum* 2. 2003. 1-9

Britten, Benjamin. *Nocturnal after John Dowland for guitar, op.70*. Faber, 1965

Brouwer Leo. *Elogio de la Danza* Madrid, Opera tres, 1964

Brouwer, Leo. *Sonata para Guitarra solo*. Madrid, Opera tres, c1991

D'angelo, Nuccio. *Duo Canzoni Lidie*. London, Eschig, 1984

Farrell, Ciaran. *The Shannon Suite*. Dublin, Cmc, 1996

Feisst, Sabine. 'Exploring the art of solo writing: Luciano Berio's *Sequenze* and nine other works', Liner notes to *The Complete Sequenzas, Alternate Sequenzas & Works for solo Instruments* by Luciano Berio. CD, Mode records, 161/3 Mode, 2006

Ginastera, Alberto. *Sonata for guitar, op. 47*. London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1978

Kerstens, Tom. 'Create IGF'S List of Commissions of New Work for Guitar' in *London Guitar Festival 8-10 March 2012*. London: IGF, 2012. 4-5

Kildea, Paul, ed. *Britten on Music*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003

Mompou, Federico. *Suite Compostelana*. Paris, Salabert, 1954

Piston, Walter. *Orchestration*. London, Gollancz, 1978

[1] Tom Kerstens. 'Create IGF'S List of Commissions of New Work for Guitar' in *London Guitar Festival 8-10 March 2012*. (LondonIGF, 2012). 4

[2] Paul Kildea, ed. *Britten on Music*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003). 271

[3] Julian Bream. 'How to Write for the Guitar'. *European Guitar Teachers Association UK Guitar Forum* 2 (2003)

[4] Ibid3

[5] Alfred Blatter. *Instrumentation and Orchestration*, 2nd ed. (Belmont CA, Schirmer, 1997). 282

[6] Bream, 'How to Write for the Guitar', 3

[7] Blatter, *Instrumentation and Orchestration*, 26

[8] Ibid 285

[9] Bream, 'How to Write for the Guitar', 5

[10] Ibid 4

[11] Ibid 5

[12] Ibid 4

[13] Ibid 2

[14] Blatter, *Instrumentation and Orchestration*, 286

[15] Bream, 'How to Write for the Guitar', 4

[16] Ibid 3

[17] Ibid 5

[18] Ibid 6

[19] Ibid 2

[20] Blatter, *Instrumentation and Orchestration*, 283

[21] Bream, 'How to Write for the Guitar', 6

[22] Ibid 7

[23] Ibid 8

Posted by tomasodurcain at [05:21](#) [7 comments:](#)

[Home](#)

Subscribe to: [Posts \(Atom\)](#)