

David Starobin
USA

Interview.
'On the advancement of the art'.
Published in *Guitar International* magazine.
(Formerly *Guitar*). March, 1985.
Venue: London.

Lance Bosman

Britain's No. 1 ● Classical Guitar Monthly

Guitar

International

March 1985
95p

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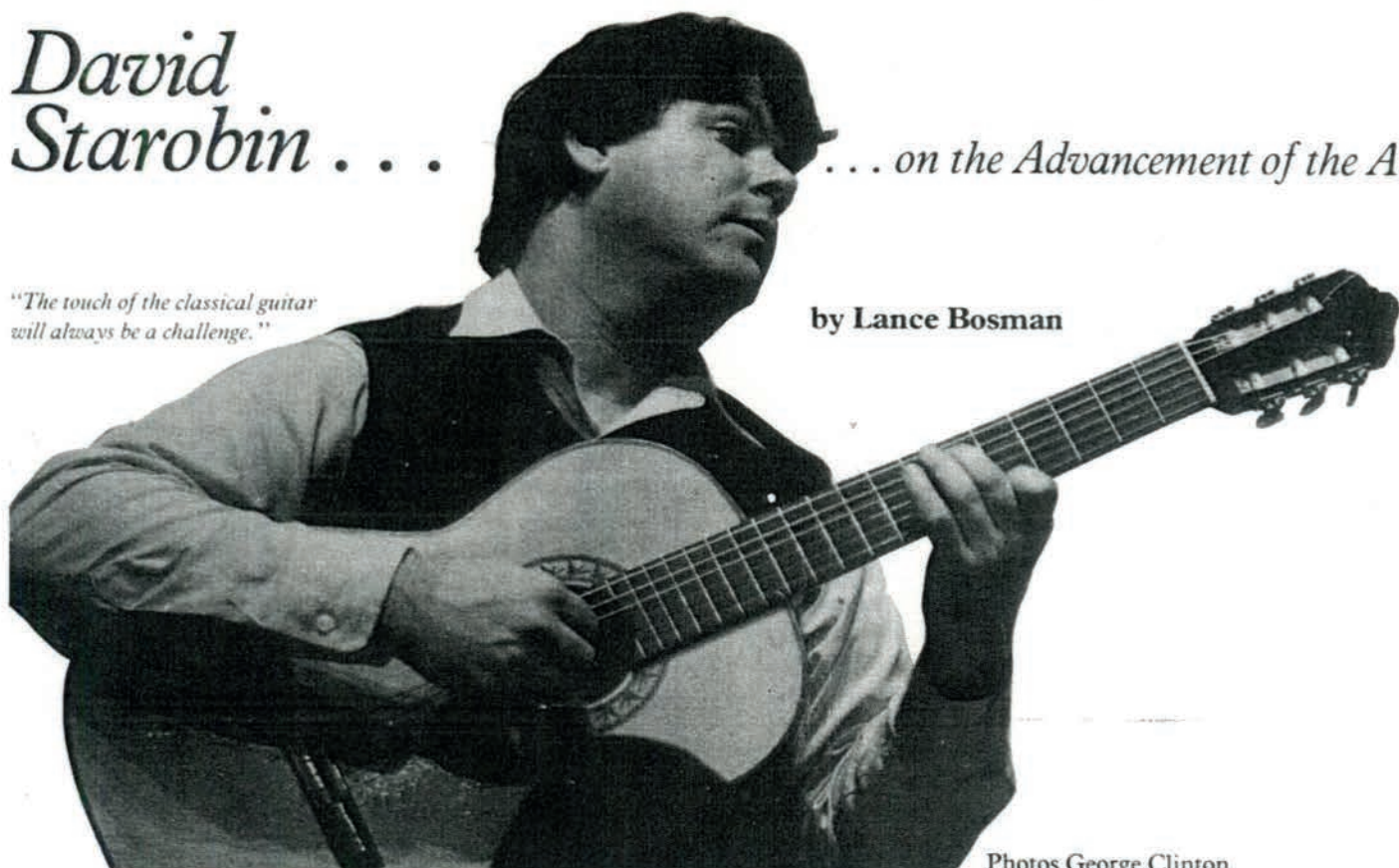
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David Starobin . . .

. . . on the Advancement of the Art

"The touch of the classical guitar will always be a challenge."

by Lance Bosman



Photos George Clinton

While the rapid turnover of 20th century musical styles has yielded a rich array of innovation, it has also given rise to an air of perplexity. Contemporary music often seems extreme and is difficult to understand, or so this is assumed. Against it, classical forms are consistent, they have the pedigree of tradition, they are phrased in tune with nature and instilled with rhyme. Even so, to what extent appreciation of classical music is gained through understanding its inner working is debatable; surely this is acquired generally through listening experience, in developing awareness of its melodic patterns, harmony, the expectancy of its tension and release. Contemporary music has similar motions, but differs in content. The more familiar its makeup becomes, the less alien or disturbing it will seem. Appreciation of it is not arrived at through comprehension — it is far too copious and diverse for that — but in getting more used to it.

Increasingly today, new music is given more light through slots in the traditional repertory. Such exposure is commendable except that, in these surroundings, it can appear as a curiosity or even harshly incongruous. However given a recital of only contemporary music, each piece takes its place, assessed within a single context. This was just such the case with David Starobin's recent guitar concert. If the audience had reservations towards the music, these were soon dissipated by Starobin's radiating commitment, and through ease of access rendered by the progression from appealing to challenging listening. Not only did this variety grant time for aural adjustment, it showed the range that new music for guitar has covered today.

Without abandoning classical music, which David admittedly reveres, it is the urgency of contemporary pieces which draws him into their pursuit. They reflect present attitudes, the currents of his urban, New York living. Attracted to new music from the age of twelve it is significant that the most influential figure then was Edgard Varèse. A composer associated with the 'futurist' movement, conscious of the machine age, Varèse included sirens and industrial sounds into his radical works of the early Twenties. From these formative impressions, David's vision of contemporary guitar music has extended through performing to record

production and commissioning new works. The latter now exceed a hundred, mostly from composers unconnected with the guitar. Several of their pieces were premiered at his 1979 Wigmore recital, with others at the concert there last November. The recent programme began with Per Norgard's *Returns* (1976), a number with all the melodic lilt and rhythmic accentuation of bluegrass music. From this lightweight kick-off, different tangents of 20th century guitar music were presented, at times obliquely as in the bristling pieces by the two American composers Elliot Carter and Milton Babbitt. Rounding the concert off on an easy note was an extract from Stephan Sondheim's current show 'Sunday in the Park with George'. Against the driving guitar accompaniment of *Sunday Song Set* (1984), baritone Patrick Mason takes the role of an artist casting a satirical look at the glittermania imposed on his rise to fame.

Duet and ensembles are considered by David as imperative to guitarists, both for a broad musical education and to liberate the instrument from its solo enclave. With 15 years experience in contemporary music ensembles, he has undertaken orchestral works of Webern, Lucas Foss and George Crumb, not to mention the music of the six groups of which he is presently a member. The music garnered from these ventures and solo commissions is now concentrated on records under his own label¹ which shows the contemporary guitar in a variety of settings. For voice and guitar are arrangements of Shakespearean songs set by Elliot Carter and William Schulman with some excellent recent work by a compatriot composer Barbara Kolb. To the solo works already mentioned earlier is recorded a cross-section of contemporary styles, spanning the arcane to semi-popular. On the lighter side is Lou Harrison's *Serenade*² (1951), in a folk-like idiom with classically styled arpeggiation on a projected melody; *Another's Fandango*³ (1981) by John Anthony Lennon (no relation) whose individual impression of Latin music is infused with harmonics in counterpoint, lending a certain poignancy of mood, despite the speedy accentuation. Notable among the group works on this catalogue are those with David and soprano Rosalind Rees who, as a duo, have already toured extensively. On the instrumental ensemble front, many

modern pieces merit this record collection a valuable source of new material for guitarists. In combinations of instruments quite suited to the guitar's character, flute, harp, cello, a host of composers are represented from less known to the celebrated names of Henze, Takemitsu and Stravinsky.

If not at present, then in the near future, the springs of new guitar literature from America and Europe will mark a highlight in its repertory. Criticised for a paucity of substantial compositions in the past, the guitar's future is assured in this experimental air of advanced techniques, novel acoustic resources, the embrace of different modern idioms, and through the increasing number of composers attracted to it. With the enterprise of Starobin and other far-sighted performers, and prompted by encouraging response, the concert is guaranteed prominence in the tide of musical advances.

"I've never been able to understand why people aren't able to respond to music of our own time. To me, it's the most immediate experience for us; because here you have composers reflecting everything going on around, the vibrancy of life today. In my own case, in New York City, I play the music of composers that live there, and I really do get the feeling that the rhythms, the energy of the music is emanating from now. I respond to that, I feel most at home with it.

"My inclination towards 20th century music started at an early age. I came into contact with the writing of, in particular, Varèse who had a lasting influence. Although I was attracted to his kind of music, I had no means to pursue it on the guitar because my technique was naturally limited then. But by the time I reached school in Baltimore I believed I had the technical foundations for contemporary pieces, at which point I met Leon Fleischer, the eminent pianist. He drew me into soloing in chamber music which was the beginning of my professional experience as a player of new music. A programme director, who finding a guitarist who could play this and based in the Washington area, gave me lots of new pieces to perform. So at that point I became active as a player of contemporary music."

Since those days, dozens of new works have passed through David's hands, many of them commissions. From the astringent area of contemporary guitar music is Carter's *Changes*³ (1983) and Babbitt's *Composition for Guitar* (1984). Both these were performed at the Wigmore this year, along with *Fantasy for Guitar* (1982) by the British composer Bayan Northcott. The latter with a sense of baroque-like counterpoint and lyricism, contrasted with the angular and rhythmically fragmented American commissions. But then, with commissions, there are written-in hazards of technical challenges and perhaps even sub-standard results. "Yes as far as that goes, I don't commission composers unless I know their music well. This I've learned, though I didn't always take this attitude. There have been commissions which have turned out less than pleasing, and if there was a performance attached, then I was obliged in that too. Most composers I deal with now I really believe in, I get to know their work well in advance of a request. The problem then is making the composer aware of the guitar's potential, that he can write for it in his own language, rather than compromise with a piece that's let's say, guitaristic. I think that a lot of composers who are less experienced tend to be somewhat swamped by the luxurious possibilities of the instrument, and then write in a sort of idiomatic guitar style that may not reflect their compositional tendency. In all cases I can recall I've worked with composers directly, either at the pre-compositional stage or from the first draft. Carter presented me with a completed sketch. I learned it, played it for him and told him what my reservations were regarding certain compositional and technical aspects. He took what I said into account and then injected his own viewpoint, extensively revising it. So in that case it was perhaps the best way of doing it — letting the composer go off on his own, then playing what he had written at sketch stage. Then if he's open

to it he'll look at the piece again and make revisions; but it varies in each case.

"For example, the Babbitt piece. When he sent the score I saw certain technical problems, very few but ones that revolved around left-hand jumps, almost impossible to connect. So I called him asked him if perhaps in one or two spots I could make octave transpositions. He absolutely forbade me because the scheme of the piece is completely determined in high organisation, that one can't make octave transpositions without upsetting the composition's logic. So in that case there was no revision, I had to play it as it was and I learned how to make those jumps. Though not many composers are as predetermined as Babbitt is in compositions, so I feel that with most works, revisions are desirable if they make musical and instrumental sense. This didn't apply to the Bayan Northcott piece which was written for the guitarist David Harvey. It's rather an amazing work, reminiscent of the Bach lute suites. I don't think we have much music as intensely contrapuntal as this is and with a wonderful passaglia in the middle. It falls into a clear classical form, and has themes repeated in a very accessible way; and despite the dense quality of the counterpoint the tunes come across very nicely."



"You can't regenerate music from another period."

Collaborations with composers not usually associated with the guitar often stimulate players into seeking unique sound resources. One such case is with the American William Bland and his *Song for David*² (1974). An instrumental piece drawn from textural changes rather than thematic developments, it calls for muted harmonics and quarter tones. With equal imagination Bland explored with Starobin in *Homage to Luis Victoria*¹ (1977) a peculiar ethereal-sounding tremolo to stimulate early vocal polyphony. "Bland is a composer rising in importance. A work of his is a set of six guitar pieces lasting about 45 minutes, a cycle on Spanish subjects. I think this is a major work for the instrument, from which I have recorded a piece. He's also writing a guitar concerto, the first movement taking three years to compose. It is immensely difficult and I don't know whether it can be played. I should mention another American composer, Tod Machover, who has written me two pieces that I consider important. One of these, *Displacement* (1979), is for guitar and computer generator tape. That piece is very interesting for it involves the live classical guitar being amplified and then mixed with the computer generator tape. In addition, Machover has also written for me an excellent concerto for guitar and 14 instruments.

"It's an interesting time we're living in, although I should say that I'm very committed to the classical guitar as it is. But now there's the possibility for digital synthesis, the chance to change its sound. The touch of the classical guitar will always be a challenge to players, let alone its repertoire; but I feel that with amplification in combination with electronics we can still preserve the basic characteristics of the instrument while introducing new mixes. Machover's pieces is an example of this: it mixes the guitar with tape textures so thoughtfully that at times you cannot distinguish the guitar from tape. So the tape in this situation, the amplification and the mixing becomes a foil for the activity of the old classical guitar. I think we're going to hear more of this in future."

Quite another line of development, and one receiving some enthusiasm, is programmatic guitar music. Subjects, events, stories are conveyed musically through tone, timbre and special effects. A composition then has two sides to it: its intrinsic sound substance plus an evocative capacity — of the kind that Rak and Koshkin write. "Yes, and I have definite opinions on this. I've played what I consider programmatic pieces, one of them from the Bland set mentioned earlier, based on Picasso's painting 'Guernica'. The guitar is amplified with the strings completely slack. For about the first six minutes of the piece there is a slow crescendo of tuning up. With heavy amplification this produces a roar, the strings grating against each other, and the effect is meant as an evocation of the sound of aeroplanes flying over a little town and about to drop bombs. Well, you know, it works as a programmatic piece, but my own preference is for music that doesn't carry a programme. I believe that abstract music is the most pure form of musical expression. As effective as many of these descriptive pieces can be, my taste is for absolute music."

"I know that a lot of guitarists have taken the programmatic direction, and I don't think it's a bad thing. The more kinds of music for the instrument, the better off we'll all be. I look at the guitar's evolution in my own time of playing, about 25 years; and in historical terms I must say that we live in the richest period of the instrument, as the repertoire accumulates we are approaching a peak. Now there must be dozens of players like me who are out there asking for works from composers. I don't think there's an instrument around today, with the exception of percussion, that's broadened in scope as much as the guitar has over the last 20 years."

The music is there, but does it receive due response? For still the same old stuff is pummelled out on the platform, in competitions, exams. Though new injections are being absorbed, their inclusions are tentative, as if in deference to a conservative audience. While the standard repertory offers security, interpretative scope, historical perspectives and the roots of music education, its inward stagnation is inevitable without outward probing and expansion. "I can't speak for the British audiences, but in the US, well I live in New York and there is a small audience there. I can't fool myself and say that it's more than that. It is growing and certain composers have broken through to larger audiences. In the US these are not really fusion composers, but they've managed to find listeners who had previously been interested in pop music. I don't think there's ever going to be a time, as there ever was in the past, where composers as a large body attract a lot of people. The expression is too unfamiliar to the general lay listener to absorb the necessary breadth of experience. I don't see the audiences for Mozart operas at contemporary music concerts. Some composers might bridge this, they may educate or give the listeners the choice to extend their listening. A lot of people almost take it for granted that there should be large audiences. Well, we have to earn that; composers have to write music that is vivid, something that will grab listeners."

"However, I don't like the romantic revival today. That doesn't interest me, for what is past is past, and you cannot regenerate music from another period. It doesn't seem honest to me, it doesn't seem real. Composers must write their own

music, but if they expect to have audiences they've got to write in a gripping way; and frankly, most are not capable of that. I don't like to belittle composers and composition as a craft because I love the music of our day; but it's rare to find a composer who reaches a lot of people. Even in my own programmes I've noticed this; I don't get the reaction that I think these pieces deserve; and that's because this music speaks to me, but obviously it doesn't to others, at least at times. I try to play the best pieces but I don't expect great audiences. If they happen to be there, then great, and I feel I'm reaching someone. I don't expect this, though, because I know the music I play is difficult on certain levels."

Perhaps the aversion, or is it complacency, towards today's musical trends is the result of concentration initially on principally classical music at the expense of studying the new. If so, couldn't the bias at formative stages of tuition be shifted to allow for more comparative assessments? Thus different treatments of music materials would be drawn into direct contact at all levels of instruction, so broadening aural perception and tolerance. "Complacency of guitar audiences, well that's probably true. Like all concert audiences they are fond of the familiar, they don't want to be challenged; and of course this is down to educational shortcomings. In the US, one could go through life without hearing a contemporary piece. You can go through school there, almost through the conservatories and hear little by contemporary composers. Now I don't know what has produced that. It may be financial aspect tied in with the music business, where training of musicians continues to perpetuate an established repertoire, and there doesn't seem to be the aggressive thought in music as there is in almost every other art form. At painting school you study the latest techniques while naturally going back to the old masters. But I just don't know of an art form that is as reactionary as music in terms of training."

"We must educate our musicians. I teach at The State University of New York at Purchase where I try to instil these values. I have lots of youngsters involved in contemporary music, and they're just blowing up a storm. I have also insisted on a intensive ensemble programme whereby the students get out of that closet of solo guitar which generates nothing but poor musicianship, as far as I'm concerned."

In performance, Starobin's involvement with new music is enhanced in the eyes of the audience by his physical gestures. The agility demanded is as though propelled by the swift arcs of his right arm and erratic head jerks. If sometimes tonal pronunciation suffered, this was insignificant to the rivetting impact of his playing. Away from the guitar, he is casual, with relaxed articulation, his facial expressions, when not hinting of the mischievous, bear all the impassivity of a waiter at the local Three Star. External features aside, David's perception of new music has clearly been nurtured not only by contact with it, but also through knowing something of the philosophies and aims of its composers.

"The more known about a composer the easier it is to plumb the depths of his music. Of course we can look at any piece, see what is there and take it for what it is; but if you've got a background to the composer, it's extremely helpful. I mean, I can't imagine anyone fully appreciating the late Beethoven quartets with having heard the early and middle ones, and understanding how Beethoven reached that maturity. And the same thing holds true for any piece you deal with. I think that knowledge of the composers thoughts is, if not prerequisite, certainly helpful."

Present waves of innovative guitar techniques and resources excel in new sound textures, extreme melodic expanse and new tonal shades. Then is the guitarist tapping these horizons sufficiently equipped from a foundation of conventional techniques? "My technique was developed through traditional lines. I studied first with Manuel Gayol from about the age of seven, and covered 16th through 20th century music. When I was about 15 I auditioned for Aaron Shearer, who immediately

impressed me as a teacher. I studied with him at the Peabody Conservatory for four years during which time I became his assistant.

"I guess I like pieces that show off what I can do. I think most guitarists like technical challenges. I suppose I have too much predilection towards virtuoso music, and that sometimes gets in the way of clarity of expression; but the composers I like are writing music that is challenging. Traditional grounding is best, but certain pieces, of course, require more than that. In the Northcott piece the rapid repeated notes are actually played with the renaissance technique, p.m. Players tend to use this stroke p'm'p, for repeated notes rather than switch to a rest stroke position; your hand is then able to stay in the same place. That's one aspect that stands outside the Segovia tradition of technique; and I don't think a lot of Spanish players are exposed to it. Another fairly novel application is quarter tones. In these I have to bend the string silently before actually striking it. Then the precise quarter note sounds without a preceding wind-up. Also the dedello technique which again stems from the renaissance. This tremolo is played with a back and forth motion of, let's say, the middle right hand finger. In the Victoria piece a lot of that sustained tremolo is this motion; it's valuable for that kind of sustain.

"My present technique is simply the result of the music I'm now playing. And with other players, they know the guitar now, it's really flourished. It's great to see this upsurge of fluent guitarists, but having said that I still have qualms about the instruction we sometimes get; for there are established parameters nowadays within which a player must arrive to achieve levels which are becoming universal. By this, I would say that percussion techniques need to be introduced to young players, augmenting conventional resources. These reveal all sorts of individual possibilities. Even so, though, the human being is a great adapter; we learn how to do these things of necessity."

Meriting wider exposure in today's programmes is Barbara Kolb's *Three Lullabies*⁴ (1980). With her characteristic refinement and individuality, each piece is given subtle, though different expression: the first with harmonics inset between stroked chords; then melodically as a passaglia, elongated with each cycle by the addition of notes and with subtractions; and the third with a vocal humming part in the spirit of a traditional lullaby. Application of tone colour is duly restrained in these pieces, a consideration that in fact prevails throughout David's playing. Emotion is there alright, but without dynamic extremes nor colouristic display. "The emotions are certainly there when I'm playing, and if they come out in the music, well fine. As far as the application of colour is concerned, I believe that colour certainly has its place but I avoid colouristic devices that interrupt the flow of a composition. The guitar, because it has these possibilities, has been abused to the point where colour becomes an end in itself. To me, the structure of the music should be clarified by colour, rather than colour intruded on it. I have a very personal view on how colour should be used on the guitar. In that sense, with that restraint, I'm not a dramatic player. For me the drama is in elucidating the musical structure, not without colouristic devices which should be involved; and not with those that make me cringe when I hear them in extremis just there to add spice. Because the instrument has this palette, it's all the more reason to use it with discrimination."

Providing an abrasive edge to David's Wigmore concert were the two works by Carter and Babbitt. Along with Roger Sessions, these figures are identified as a nucleus of independent modern American music. Long since shedding the European tradition, each is renowned for a personal mode of composition. In the case of Carter it's interesting to compare his Shakespearean song setting *Tell me where is fancy bred*² of 1938 for voice and guitar in truly traditional style with the arcane guitar solo *Changes*³ some forty years on. Milton

Babbitt, an exponent of electronic music, is also known for his rationalisation of maths, a former profession, with composition. A representation of this is *Composition for Guitar*, an angular marathon for the solo performer in that it is conceived as a six-part vocal polyphony grouped as three duets. The programme notes by the composer refer somewhat to the mental processes behind this work; but so abstruse are they, we're better off left in ignorance.

"I wouldn't link Milton Babbitt with any other person. I've heard him speak eloquently and lucidly; on other occasions I've understood maybe every fifth word and none of his concepts. He's brilliant but operates at times on levels above me. The interesting thing about Babbitt and Carter, Sessions, their musical expressions, is that they all have personalities so different. I'm getting to know their work a bit, and there's no confusing them, for they all cut new paths individually, all far removed from Europe in different directions. Carter was for a long time attached to a post Boulanger kind of composition. He studied with her in the Thirties, and I think for a time, certainly until the mid-forties, he was in search of his own language. The pieces he wrote then were tending towards the complexity that his later work shows. Like other American composers of the time, I think he was held back by this idea of popularism typical of Copland. They really thought it was a duty to reach an audience at that point. He then developed his own music, and if it wasn't going to be popular, so be it.

"With Sessions, there is a composer who from the beginning followed the most logical path of composition. He is like Beethoven in that sense, for one piece just follows another and you can see the gradual development. Babbitt is involved with the rethinking of all musical processes. The rules he came up with at an early age tended to effect not only his own music but that of others around. His methods of organisation were so profound and fine they became important theoretically for other composers, especially of serialism. As a teacher he has suffered the fate, as other teachers, in seeing this side perpetuated and his music ignored. Carter, also a serialist composer, relates the timing of notes to particular intervals: certain intervals dictate specific durations. So basically the pitch series determines the time series. This applies to his guitar piece, which is incredible in terms of predetermined structure. This of course is a challenge to the performer; I mean, the piece has to be played accurately in order to convey this structure. There is a lot less scope to exercise personal touches, and this might be good or bad, but there is a certain rigid attention to detail that must be applied. The dynamics are controlled serially, the pitch, the rhythm and the register level is too. I had to ask him about a mis-notation in the score, and he produced the original, and what it looked like no one would like to see. It was a mass of complications that didn't resemble mine, the final product. It's a very interesting view of composing, and it's not in any way mechanical; I don't want to give that impression, because all these things are arrived at through choice and decisions. It's just that he has the ability to determine beforehand all the aspects of the piece. So it's not in any way an inhuman kind of music."

Which doesn't alter the fact that some have regarded compound serialism as a process with contrived results; that it shackles the immediacy of the uninhibited emotional urge . . . "well okay, if some composers feel that way, it's obviously not the way to go. It would be terrible if they all leaned in that direction. It's like any compositional technique: certain people can assimilate them, others don't. But I think to cry about a particular technique is not good; it's the result that matters and whether it's used well. I think we should criticise music and not techniques.

"Do we need to know what kind of scales Debussy used? No, we listen to them and say they're beautiful sounds. A piece can stand apart from its technique. If we need to rely on knowing that Milton Babbitt has written three contrapuntal duos that function on various levels in that piece, and only with that



"My present technique is the result of the music I'm now playing."

knowledge we can appreciate it . . . no, music has got to speak on its own apart from supporting information."

Theoretical knowledge of technique is not essential for appreciation, but awareness of modern influences — why the music sounds the way it does — certainly helps. Programme notes given to philosophical rambling and high-blown terminology are off-putting; but a grasp of 20th century movements, even just in outline, is well on the way to evaluating them on their own terms and not as bizarre offshoots of tradition. "I'm not saying that explanations don't help, for often they do; but in the long run, if a piece has to rely on that it won't work. What we are talking about is educating listeners. I have no doubt that if a child heard vast amounts of contemporary music from an early age instead of the kind they listen to in elevators, their musical level would be so much greater; and not through knowledge but intuitively. I see this with my son who has been exposed to lots of music. He listens to new music and he talks about it, saying he enjoyed this and not that, and he tells me why: that it went on too long, that it didn't go anywhere — and he's five years old. So here's someone who, because he's been exposed to modern music from the beginning, doesn't find it a mystery or foreign.

"It has the capability of reaching people despite the complexity that our age has given it. There's no question the complexity of our music is a direct result of the time we live in. We are bombarded with so many different influences. You see people of every race and colour around, you hear news from every corner of the world. We're in a society now where we communicate at a rate unheard of before. So a composer of our time must reflect that. I don't think that contemporary music is alien, it's just foreign to people because we haven't encouraged audiences from an early age to listen to it."

One way of bringing the contemporary guitar to wider notice is by increasing its role in ensembles. Guitarists inclined towards group work will find with 'Bridge Records' a storehouse of new material. From numerous possibilities, selections could include Barbara Kolb's *Sentences*² (1976), a song cycle with guitar referring to autumnal subjects; and her *Songs Before an Adieu*³ (1979). In this piece the duo is augmented with a flute, the mood of the music changing from its sedate opening to hysteria and ultimate remorse. Also for voice and guitar, and in a kind of showtime idiom, composer Gregg Smith casts an irreverent look in *Step*² (1975) over a vista of New York City. Taken from old Russian poetry in Stravinsky's *Four Songs*² (1953) for voice, flute, harp and guitar. The expected rhythmic irregularities are peppered here with crossed chromatic, modal and major tonalities. Solely instrumental is an extended work by Meyer Kupferman, *Icaris*⁵ (1976) for viola, cello and amplified guitar. With long and anguished spirals, the music traces the mythological Icaris in his winged flight to the sun. Henze's *Carillon, Recitatif, Masque*⁴ (1974) for mandolin, guitar and harp is a really

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