

**Richard Rodney Bennett**  
England

Notes from a pre-concert talk  
'Line drawings.'  
Published in *Guitar International* magazine.  
(Formerly *Guitar*). November, 1985.  
Venue: Cheltenham, England.

Lance Bosman



# LINE DRAWINGS



1st perf. handshakes with Julian Bream.

## Reflections on RICHARD RODNEY BENNETT'S SONATA FOR GUITAR

By **Lance Bosman**

PHOTOS: GEORGE CLINTON

It's interesting to ponder to what extent musical inspiration is stimulated by the actual techniques of composition. More than likely it is a reciprocation of the two, in that craftsmanship serves to develop ideas which themselves often arise through some compositional method. Along with technique there are of course other factors which can also set the creative impulses going. Different kinds of music from obscure origins and cultures can be inspiring, and even non-musical influences too, such as social contacts and natural phenomena.

These considerations were aired recently by Richard Rodney Bennett while assessing his approach to composition generally, and with his guitar compositions specifically in mind. For many years the serial method has provided him with a basis for writing in a variety of styles covering orchestral, chamber, choral, opera and solo works. It is also used for his two guitar pieces, the *Five Impromptus* (1968) and the *Guitar Concerto* (1970). The former prompted the latter inasmuch that the five miniatures acted as a springboard for the guitar into the surrounding of an ensemble.

Occupied as a full-time composer since his student days, Bennett's output is by now prolific and diverse. With the concerto for guitar are others for oboe, viola, violin and two for piano. Concertos and solo works hold for him a particular fascination, to bring out the individuality of the instrument or its player, the full expression of their characters. And the more unusual the instrument, a harp, organ or even that early electronic keyboard the ondes martenot, the more alluring the challenge. Within these more intimate settings and in the wider forms too, there is often a sense of drama and theatricality, resulting from pitting one instrument against others in the group. This attribute has rendered his music attractive to the concert listener, along with which wider recognition has been gained on the popular front of films and jazz. From numerous film scores we may recall 'Murder on the Orient Express', 'Far from the Madding Crowd' and the

'Billion Dollar Brain'. Contact with jazz began with the piano, which he still keeps his hand in, these days mainly as a jazz accompanist. A landmark of his jazz compositions is the 7-movement ballet suite *Jazz Calender*. Referring to the children's poem 'Monday's Child', etc., its cast of moods and rhythms lift and swing, entirely free from formal restraint.

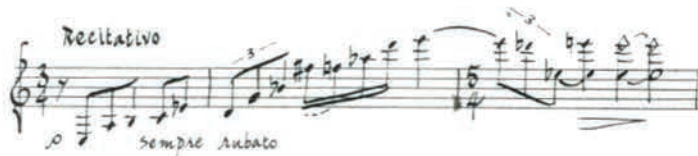
An English composer, Bennett, born in 1936, has always been attracted to French art, epitomised for him in Debussy. This predisposition was no doubt strengthened with studies under Lennox Berkeley, also influenced by 20th century French music. From London Bennett was to move to Paris where he met Boulez. Without taking up the strictures of Boulez's serialism, Rodney Bennett's own application of the method has proved to be a durable and highly adaptable reference for his varied modes of writing. Or so it was until recently when jazz indirectly prompted him to reconsider his attitude and approach to composition. One work to emerge since this reappraisal is the extensive guitar sonata written in 1983 for Julian Bream. Premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in July this year, the piece was introduced with the following talk by the composer. Relaxed and delivered with a self-effacing and warm manner, Bennett's views of his music, especially regarding the present sonata, were revealing in their directness. As much as one can be objective about a largely subconscious process, the point was clear how a long-term interplay of technique and sensitivity can give rise to compositions hewn gradually into shape or sprung from those rare, but welcome, spontaneous flourishes.

"Since there has been a great deal of insubstantial music written for the guitar, composers haven't been stimulated by its repertoire as one might be by the violin. So they don't write for it and the bad music goes on being propagated. I'm not putting down guitar music, it's a pleasure to play; but most of the standard repertoire is short studies, bagatelles.

"What does inspire a composer is a virtuoso player. I



remember the first time I heard Heinz Honniger, the oboist, playing a beautiful piece by Hummel. Hearing that I thought I'm going to write a piece for him, I've got to. There was another instance when I heard the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who I knew as a jazz player. Again I thought I must write a piece for him. These are the players that make one want to write seriously. And so with Julian Bream who I've known since I was about 17. I was always put off by the guitar repertoire but he induced me to write for it, and with the present sonata that makes the third piece I've written for him. It happened initially during an empty spell that I began writing some guitar pieces. the *Impromptus* resulted which were impromptus for me in terms of composition, they were spontaneous. Now they seem as though they were sketches, painters sketches for a larger canvas, ultimately a concerto."



Though they may sound as though written off the cuff, Bennett's *Impromptus* are in fact finely calculated. Given contrasting presentations and moods, they are fundamentally unified by a single note-series. (See 'Serialism' *Guitar* 7/81) From this row and its derivatives, inversion and retrograde, etc., the pieces cover a wide melodic and harmonic scope. The first of them 'Recitativo' is musing in character, its opening line dispensing the series across the ascending phrase. More than just an announcement of the row it is a melodic statement to be recalled again and again through the whole group of pieces. Another common feature is the repeated-note pattern at the end of the line. This too is heard at several points, sometimes prominently, sometimes varied. For the second piece, 'Agitato', the series is applied harmonically, with rocking chords played between snatches of the above phrase. No. 3, 'Elegiaco' is sombre in mood, the 4th, 'Con fuoco' is spirited and the arpeggiated 'Arioso' closes with the phrase that opened the first.

So between them this set of miniatures take in a variety of textures, they hop about rhythmically, they are individually embellished with auxiliary notes from outside the series, and yet all relate to one serial foundation. In short they demonstrate a successful fusion of musical sensitivity and compositional technique.

"Standard guitar music is very tonal, its open strings are more or less in E minor. Therefore it's easy to finger tonal triads. The fact that my concert music is basically atonal means that for the *Impromptus* I didn't resort to familiar voicing on the instrument. So perhaps they gave a fresh sound to the repertoire. They really served as little sketches, like painters' sketches for a larger canvas, in this case a concerto for guitar and chamber ensemble."

That the *Impromptus* were at the back of the composer's mind when the concerto began to surface is suggested by the introductory phrase shown here. Like the first of the smaller forms this larger one also unfolds with a single, probing line rising to a peak where it rests on sustained repeated notes. As before, this pattern is transferred through the movements, reappearing in different forms, noticeably in the guitar cadenzas. In the first movement the instrumentation is so disposed as to create a sense of competition between soloist and the ensemble. In fact, at the beginning there's a feeling of downright hostility, the guitar and group throwing kind of bitchy remarks at one another. The soloist then takes a cadenza which leads straight into a quiet, flowing movement . . . they're friends again. In the final the guitar and ensemble heckle once more, but without asperity now, more in tantalisation. To attain a dramatic edge, yet still keep the guitar with the upper hand, must demand a thoughtful balance of instrumentation.

"The guitar is a very intimate instrument, not really for the concert hall. So I thought it would be nice to score it intimately: three woodwind, two brass, celesta, percussion and a string trio. In this I made a misjudgement, not considering the limited volume of the guitar. A prominent solo oboe has a penetrating sound and that can cut the guitar right out. So what I should have done is write the guitar against strings, a cloud of sound rather than a linear texture. Therefore, because of the guitar's modest volume, we had problems balancing the concerto. There were in fact problems when Julian was performing the concerto in New York. My publishers then had sent a set of parts which were all mis-paged, the wrong order. So most of the rehearsal was spent rearranging them. Not having time to balance the piece Julian amplified the guitar which he doesn't normally do. So suddenly all the balance problems were solved. Whenever I've written for the guitar in concert since then I've always asked for it to be gently amplified rather than getting the orchestra to quieten."



"I can't write music without knowing how it's going to be played."

"In writing the work itself I called on a former student of mine, Michael Blake Watkins. He knows the problems of composition and the technique of the guitar. For myself I used a chart of the fingerboard which is simply six chromatic scales starting from the open strings. From this chart I can see what's going to work rather than go for it by hand. The guitar fascinates me in that it's a very personal instrument. You can play the same notes at different places to obtain individual expression. Julian applied his own editing to the sonata which differs from Michael's, proving to me how personal the instrument is. This is the way I approached this concerto, because I can't write music without knowing how it's going to be played. Players tend to say, just write anything and I'll tell you if it's unplayable. Well I can't, I find that inhibiting."

"In the 13 years that went by I always had it in mind to write an extended work for the guitar, where the instrument is the sole protagonist. Solo works fascinate me because they're like line drawings, where there's one line, as it were, that has to supply colour, volume, distance, everything. This is an individual challenge, different than writing for groups of



# CONCERTO

for Guitar and Chamber Ensemble

Richard Rodney Bennett

Lento e rubato (♩ = 54)

Fl.

ob.

B.clt.

5 3 3  
4 8 4

Hn.

Tpt.

1  
Pc. (soft sticks) Tam-tam large cym. med. cym. small cym. mp pp

2

MARACAS

3

3

3

Col.

5 3 3  
4 8 4

Guit.

♩ ma sonare

Vn.

Vla.

Cello

© Copyright 1971 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London

UE 15406 L

All rights reserved  
Printed in England



instruments which automatically create depth. So at the end of 1983 I'd been at the end of a compositional drag, which is nice when it happens, and I thought I'd do this guitar piece. I wanted to get away from writing a series of little contrasting pieces, and instead make it a substantial work.

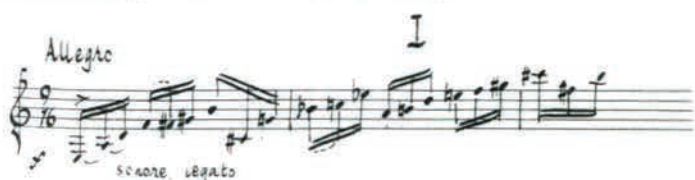
"It so happened that I had more or less abandoned serialism for various reasons after years of using it. What made me break with the technique was when I began a piece for flute and strings in memory of a friend, a jazz pianist I knew with a wonderful harmonic sense. Instead of starting with a formula I thought 'what music would he have liked.' And suddenly I began writing a different kind of music, which is neither here nor there when you hear it, but for me was a very important turning. Of course, my music didn't suddenly turn into a flow not governed by anything; but it meant that I was no longer conscious of a series in my music, from about the beginning of 1983 onwards.



"I wanted to get away from a series of little contrasting pieces."

"There are many ways you can start composing. Sometimes you think about it for months, rejecting and making choices. Sometimes you plan a lot formally, which is fun but doesn't have a lot to do with composition, for you can mislead yourself into thinking you're composing when in fact it's just planning. I find that if I do that, when it gets down to writing, it's died on me because I've planned it out of existence. Sometimes the starting point of a piece can be emotional, or functional to solve a technical problem, which can be interesting. Sometimes the most fertile beginning for me is just to sit down and write without knowing where I'm going, how long the piece will be, or anything."

Which is just the impression that the opening of the guitar sonata creates. In marked contrast to the earlier works where each starts by feeling out the ground, this one jumps out, do or die. Having set the pace it continues that way with the odd lapse between. To signal the end of this movement the first phrase is repeated, rounding the activity off.



Accordingly the second movement is slow, and although dramatic still, is more with a feeling of sorrow than agitation. There is a strong textural dimension now of rasgueado and arpeggiated harmony. Around this is a repeated note motif, distinctly heard at the beginning here and summoned much later in the finale.



The third movement is subdivided with two outer sections of punctuated repeated note patterns flanking a relaxed melody. And for the finale, elements from the former movements are drawn together and shuffled around.



"Even from the very first spontaneous gesture I was setting up a kind of framework for what that first movement was going to be . . . dramatic, fast, etc. Also I was aroused by the notes that I'd written. The first 18 became a sort of series for the movement from which further material could be derived. It was just like taking up a pencil and beginning to doodle . . . a nice way of starting music. Once under way it began to feel like a sonata movement, the contrasts, the recapitulation and its length of around five minutes. So really I had laid the ground in an almost involuntary way.

"The second movement obviously had to be very different, much slower to relieve the tension. I remember thinking about the dark, recitative quality of some Spanish flamenco guitar music, and though this doesn't sound that way, it was that sense which made me write the second movement as it is — that rather austere, passionate quality. To escape from that darkness briefly there is a lighter, flowing section within. In the third movement I needed a different sort of contrast and, again thinking of Spanish music, now gave it an insistent rhythm. For the fourth movement I tried something which is not particularly novel but was new and interesting for me. This movement is fantasia-like with quotes from earlier movements, as a collage, a picture cut up and pieced together differently. It starts as the first movement with the 18-note flurry, but that leads straight into a reminiscence of the second movement, the dark flamenco feeling. Then there's a variation from the first movement and this leads into . . . well it doesn't matter what this leads to, it was some kind of free association like a recapitulation of things at a remove and in different order. And the piece ends with a coda built from the opening bars but much slower now.

"Incidentally this piece is 18 minutes long and was written in 17 days. So I was working hard and fast. This in itself is quite meaningless, except to say that it was taken up with great enthusiasm. I thought I was locked into it for those days for I was so fascinated with its technical problems and the excitement of writing for a virtuoso. By comparison I'm having a new piece performed next March by the Halle with Robert Tear. This is four love songs, only five minutes longer than the sonata, yet it took me two years to write. I suppose



this doesn't signify very much, but you do get excitement writing fast. This is how I felt, with this intensity, which doesn't always happen with composing. This is the way I approached this piece, how it turned out. If I had explained it in terms of serial theory, its procedures, that wouldn't have meant a thing when it comes to hearing it. What matters is its evolution in broad terms, that it started with a flourish and that along the way flamenco entered my mind."

On the subject of influences, it's surprising that jazz hasn't infiltrated the composer's concert music. Ingrained from student days when he worked the rounds as a jazz pianist, his talents for the idiom flowered with ensemble compositions *Jazz Calendar* (1963), *Soliloquy* (1966) *Jazz Pastoral* (1969) and continued with piano accompanying Marion Montgomery. Intentionally or otherwise has not this side of his musical nature extended across other areas of activity, even perhaps into the present sonata?

"I don't think there's a definite trace of jazz here except possibly in a rhythmic sense. The rhythm of a jazz tune can go over a solid pulse and yet be distorted in relation to that pulse. Jazz soloists do the most incredible things with the rhythm and still be conscious of the underlying beat. I do that quite a lot, thinking of the tune floating over the beat. This happens in the third movement of the sonata where there's a rhythmic thing going on underneath a long floating tune which seems to be divorced from that rhythm. That is jazz, but you know it's jazz at a great remove."

Considering other forces, those outside music, are there visual associations with composition, either preconceived or taking shape along the way? Possibly during the process of a composition or from its emergent atmosphere images or some kind of connotation impose themselves in mind.

"Musically, other guitar pieces interested me at the time of writing the sonata: the Britten *Nocturnal* and Henze's *Winter Music*. Had I listened to 19th century music then it wouldn't have meant much to me in regard to what I was writing; but listening to works of two major 20th century composers was a stimulus. In general, yes, scenarios nearly always do come to mind when I compose. Very often a thematic idea will take on

a character, as in a novel, a character of obtuseness, of aggressiveness, that will suddenly interfere with other things occurring in the music, when composing a chamber piece I might see an instrument as having not a theatrical role but with an interesting behaviour. These little kind of subjects go on in my music.

"During composing I sometimes think of things way outside music, of being in love, of sex. I remember Britten once saying 'the last thing you're thinking about when starting a piece is the notes; and the last concern when it's finished is of the technique that was involved.' I think that with a lot of music the impetus comes from outside. But I don't think it's a question of direct impressions, it's more an act of writing about things than writing with notes. Also of course the guitar's a romantic instrument with all kinds of associations, visual, dance, and because of these it surprised me that my piece turned out to be called a sonata. But I wanted to write a work that had a really extended musical argument and through this draw on images.

"My concert music activity is separate from the film scores, and it's gone in a straight unbroken line. I've always used the same kind of techniques and so I can only relate what I'm writing now to what I was composing when I was at the Royal Academy. I've written a lot of different kinds of music, film music particularly; and I also like writing for children, I find that a relaxation. Obviously for children you adopt a different stylistic language; but I'm not a jazz composer, for example, so it really boils down to childrens' music, film work and concert. The concert music for me has followed a progression; and it gets better because when I was 20 I wrote anything I fancied, which is a good thing to do at that age, for you learn all manner of styles. Then later you find something like your own voice.

'Impromptus' reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition; recorded by Julian Bream, 'Dedication' RCA 25419.

'Guitar Concerto' reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition; recorded 'Julian Bream 70s' RCA SB 6876.

'Sonata for Guitar' reproduced by kind permission of Novello & Co. Ltd.



#### SOLID SILVER GUITARS

miniature classical guitars handfinished & hallmarked as brooches or stick pins

ONLY £9.50 + 50p P/P

Also available as Pendants and in 9 carat gold. Details on request.

Cheques or PO's with order please to:

Paul May, 2 Priory Lane, Toft Monks, Beccles NR34 0EZ



««« MARTIN FLEESON »»»

» luthier »

I wish to inform friends and customers of my new address

Carne House, Boskenwyn, Heamoor, Penzance, Cornwall TR20 8UP  
Tel: 0736-63701

#### BRENTWOOD GUITAR STUDIO

7 Coprfold Road, Brentwood, Essex. (nr. Multi-Storey Car Park)

**Classical Guitars:** The widest selection in Essex.

**Contreras Ramirez Alhambra Goya Asturias Sanchis Cuenca**

**Accessories:** Strings - sets and singles, bags, cases, tuners, footstools, etc.

**Music:** Examination music, collections, tutors, from beginner to advanced.

**Tuition:** Individual professional tuition - beginner to Diploma level - under the supervision of William Grandison, Prof. Trinity College of Music, London.

**Teaching Aid:** Cassette - Trinity College of Music - Graded Albums 1-4 recorded by William Grandison - £4.85 inc. p/p.

**Mail Order:** 24 Hour Answerphone - 0277-222694  
Access - Visa welcome.

f r e t s

#### GUITAR CENTRE NOTTINGHAM

King John's Arcade, 13 Bridlesmith Gate, Nottingham NG1 2GR. Tel: 0602 500161

Open Monday 10 - 2. Tuesday - Saturday 10 - 5.30.

**SPECIALISTS** in Classical, flamenco, acoustic and electro/acoustic guitars including: **RAMIREZ, CONTRERAS, ALHAMBRA, SANCHIS, IBANEZ, LOWDEN, TAKAMINE**... Large selection of guitar music, strings and accessories. Fast efficient **MAIL ORDER SERVICE**.