

LOS ANGELES GUITAR QUARTET

No guitar quartet in the world has a higher profile than the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. Formed in 1980 by four young guitarists from the University of Southern California, it achieved prominence almost from the beginning. After ten years Anisa Angarola left, and Andrew York came in to join John Dearman, William Kanengiser and Scott Tennant. The brilliant style of the ensemble remained unchanged, continuing to be highly successful, both in concerts and in their many recordings.

All four members are distinguished soloists in their own right, and Andrew York has made a considerable reputation as a composer of originality. Classical Guitar magazine's Reviews Editor Chris Kilvington heard them in 1995 and, as one always willing to stray from established routes, lost no time in going to interview them. His first question concerned their arrangements and compositions: how they did them, why they did them, and whether or not the arranger had individual members of the ensemble in mind.

Andrew York: First I just get the musical ideas I want to express down on paper. Though I may come up with an idea that is tailor-made for one of the four of us, it's mostly in the final construction of the parts that I allocate the material to take advantage of each of our individual strengths and also to make the parts at least somewhat democratic. I dislike pieces where all the action is in the first one or two parts. There's no need to give all the action to the first chair in a guitar quartet which has four homogeneous instruments. Playing third guitar myself, I hope for more than a boom-chic accompaniment pattern to play. However, when I'm asked to write for other quartets I'm sometimes told to give all the hard stuff to a certain player. In that case I'll try to accommodate their needs while still making the other parts tolerably interesting.

William Kanengiser: We've become pretty picky about arrangements, and we've found that most of the commercially available ones don't meet our needs. It's a bit of an 'if you want something done right' attitude, I suppose, but it's also because there are some specific requirements that we look for. Obviously, it must be a good piece that lends itself to transcription, done with some understanding of the particular resonance and voicing that works for four guitars. But we also try to play arrangements that make use of John's extended bass range, as well as other voicing possibilities — I frequently tune the sixth string to C and the fifth to G.

Even more important, we always want to play reasonably democratic arrangements. So many published ones have first guitar playing the high stuff, fourth always playing the bass, etcetera, so that things aren't passed around or shared. Well, the other guys simply wouldn't abide me getting all the juicy melodies all of the time! My arrangement of *Capriccio Espagnol* and John's *Barber of Seville* Overture are good examples of this equal-voiced writing. This approach not only makes it more interesting for us, but for audiences as well. Since we're not a 'family' group like a string quartet, the real strength of our configuration is the possibility for any one of us to play first fiddle.

What does the group feel about the value of the bass guitar in guitar ensemble playing and composing?

John Dearman: I play a seven-string guitar. The seventh is a low A with a 2-fret bass extension for that string — there is a notch of fingerboard which continues behind the nut under the seventh string. It's hard to imagine how we got along without it before. Transcriptions are so much easier with the ability to open up voicings and contrapuntal textures, and it also adds an extra element of color to orchestral arrangements. My guitar also has 22 frets under the first and second strings (up to high D), and while these aren't the most



Photo by Blake Little

attractive sounding notes they are nevertheless useful for doublings, orchestral color and so on. I use them in almost all of our transcriptions.

One of the important things in any guitar ensemble playing is choice of fingerings, as these naturally affect timbres and mechanics greatly. Achieving this in duo is one thing, but how do four players manage to achieve a satisfying answer to this most interesting challenge?

Scott Tennant: Well, first of all, by the time we get around to fingering the music we've usually read through the piece and know what it sounds like. This helps a lot. I personally proceed to finger my part based on comfort and ease first. Then I see if I'm playing in duo with anybody somewhere and usually consult with that person to try and match fingerings based on the phrasing or whatever. This is a tough question, really, because no matter what we do fingerings are constantly being changed as we work on the piece.

Any instrumental ensemble needs to practice regularly together, and I was naturally interested to know how the quartet worked in this respect, whether they subdivided, how they discussed all the various points of interpretation which inevitably arise, and so forth.

John Dearman: When we first began playing together, we did so on a fairly casual basis, meeting about once a week — just often enough to get things together for our next ensemble class meeting. Within a short time we started getting real offers for concerts and gradually made more time for rehearsals, probably peaking at about five or six days a week leading up to our first appearance in New York in 1984.

As our separate lives and careers have become more busy and complex, we normally find it best to meet for an all-day session once per week. Practices begin with espresso drinks all round, followed by discussions of business matters, followed by more espresso. When we finally do get to practising we usually try to begin with something that takes a fair amount of concentration or discipline. Brushing up old repertoire is a good example; if we put that off till the end of the rehearsal everyone's a bit loopy and before you know it the *Brandenburg Concerto* becomes a polka and Falla turns into reggae or bluegrass.

Metronome work, incidentally, is often helpful in correcting problems in tempo that always seem to creep into more familiar repertoire. That out of the way, the rest of the rehearsal is given over to a combi-

nation of recent or new repertoire, the reading of new scores, and of course more espresso. When dealing with the pieces in progress, we usually work as a four. We sit around a table in order to be able to hear the other parts equally, though before the first performance it's a good idea to sit in line order so as to simulate the concert situation, where of course you can't actually hear what anyone is doing. We're actually not very systematic. We generally play along at tempo until a problem arises. If it's a rhythmic issue, we go through the parts solo, in pairs, subdividing, with metronome etc. This is the easy part. It's tempo, dynamics, articulations, colors, rubatos, ritardandos, use of ligados and all the rest that take up most of our time in rehearsal, as these are by nature much more subjective and therefore subject to often endless negotiation.

It seems to me that in any ensemble the discussions about interpretations, choice of repertoire, etc. can surely develop musical thinking, in that nobody can simply operate subjectively but must organize his or her thoughts in such a way as to justify them. What does the quartet feel about this?

Andrew York: We each certainly have different ideas, not only in musical interpretation, but also in choice of repertoire. As you say, the advantage in discussing a musical approach to a phrase is that you get exposed to other viewpoints, which can be enlightening and make your own thinking less static. We try to reach compromises when there are noticeably different ideas on a musical strategy. It can be helpful and personally clarifying to have to articulate your thoughts about something as abstract as music and the performance itself can benefit from the pooling of our musical thoughts. The danger in interpretation by committee is becoming stubborn and arguing a point just to get your own way. In terms of repertoire, my preference is to expand our selection of works stylistically to move us out of a strictly 'classical' interpretation.

Who sits far left? Does he cue everything?

Bill Kanengiser: I sit far left, as seen looking out from the stage. We've experimented with a lot of different seating arrangements. We even used to switch seats, depending on the piece, but decided that playing musical chairs was too confusing for everyone. Ultimately we settled on a standard configuration, with me on the left, then Scott, Andy and John. It works out in our arrangements to be 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th parts respectively. We're so used to this that we frequently find ourselves sitting in restaurants and

queuing up for planes in score order — a nasty habit, but we're trying to break it!

Anyway, we have found that it's quite convenient for the far left player to give most of the cues, for the simple reason that it's easier to catch a cue coming from the fretboards side of your peripheral vision. Obviously, I don't give all the cues because it depends on the musical situation as well, but I do begin a large percentage of the tunes with a quick nod of the skull. Cuing is an acquired skill, but it only hints at feel and tempo; we already have to have a pretty unified sense of how a piece is going to go after I nod.

How does the group manage precise rubato, especially those not planned and drilled in rehearsal?

John Dearman: The key to improvised rubato is to be aware of, or even to assign in rehearsal, a leader for a given passage. Then in performance everyone simply follows that person's lead. This is a neat trick for ensembles as it accomplishes two very important things — we have the ability to play like a 'soloist', in that we can play a piece with more rhythmic spontaneity, and we can also avoid a huge argument in rehearsal about how to plan out the rubato as a group.

A quartet of the standing of the LAGQ obviously has a lot to offer in teaching others. Do you ever teach as a group, and what weaknesses have you found in ensemble students? And do you find that teaching helps in any way to clarify your own playing?

Scott Tennant: Many guitarists play in ensembles as if they were driving their car and only focusing on the ground ten feet in front of them. In ensemble playing, like driving, what the others around you are doing helps to determine what your next move will be.

Bill Kanengiser: I teach ensemble at the University of Southern California as an individual, so with my students there I can call the shots. When the quartet is on tour we sometimes teach ensemble masterclasses, 'tagteam' style, and the proceedings can border on anarchy — screaming, ranting, endless headbutting over whether an entrance should be *p* or *mp*, or if a cut-off should be on or just after the third beat — a lot like rehearsals! Well, it's not really that bad and we obviously do share many opinions about musical aesthetics and practice strategies. Sometimes, besides the basics of ensemble mechanics, we try to impart to the students that an ensemble doesn't start to mature until it has had its first big musical argument.

Guitar ensembles are such an important development

tool for students, for so many reasons — working on solid rhythm, strong projection, how to listen, how to work effectively with other musicians. The biggest problem as I see it in student groups is a tendency not to prepare an ensemble part with nearly the attention and detail that would be given to a solo piece. I try to emphasize that rehearsals shouldn't be sightreading or part-practice sessions; everyone should have their part down so that full attention can be given to listening and playing together. Sometimes we even follow this advice . . .

I know that as players you have all had a strong relationship with Pepe Romero, from USC. In addition to being an internationally renowned soloist, he is also a member of the famous Los Romeros family guitar quartet and is known as a fine teacher. Will you tell us more about him?

John Dearman: What I've always found remarkable and inspiring about Pepe is his ability to project his personality in performance. He so obviously enjoys what he's doing, has so much confidence and to my mind strikes a perfect balance between artistry and entertainment. His teaching can be very abstract. He talks a lot about things like visualization, perception and the awareness of the actual vibrations we create while playing. See what living in California does to you? Really, it makes a lot of sense and covers some different territory from the usual. As for quartet work, I think he once said 'It's the most difficult thing. Without Papa, we would fight all the time!'

Bill Kanengiser: I have such deep feelings for Pepe. He really is my guitar 'guru'. Obviously, he's transcended the technical boundaries of the instrument, but he also has such a profound sense of the poetry of music and the artist's role in the musical world. He's an amazing teacher — sometimes very specific and technical, sometimes inspirational and mystical. The funny thing is that, despite his vital impact on me as a player and his role in putting the quartet together when we were his students, he didn't directly work with us as an ensemble coach more than four or five times. The model that he and Los Romeros gave us to follow was the real impetus that inspired us, even though we evolved to be a pretty different kind of group. We've stayed very close and Pepe, and his family did us a great honor by playing at the fund-raiser in 1993 for Andy's wife Barbie after her accident. I also thank Pepe for making me an espresso addict.

I was fascinated by Scott's 'hidden thumb' technique, which I had heard of somewhere. Which thumb? I

mean, how do you hide a thumb? And why?

Scott Tennant: Actually, I believe the complete title is 'The Secret Hidden Ninja Thumb Technique'. Someone heard me do this tremolando effect with my thumb in Falla's *El Amor Brujo*, in the movement titled 'The Cave'. All it entails is skimming rapidly back and forth over a bass string with the thumbnail to create an eerie, creepy effect. In order to do this well I've got to plant down my three fingers on the first three strings for stability and then turn my hand slightly to where it looks like a lute player's hand with the thumb under. So I guess this person couldn't see my thumb moving and therefore the sound seemed to be coming from nowhere. Like a Ninja-in-the-night, eh?

What are you looking forward to in England?

Scott Tennant: Finally getting a chance to sample some Tennent's ale on tap. It's our family name, which, through the research of an uncle, became Tennant some time about a century ago in Canada.

John Dearman: One word — Chunnel! You know, we Angelenos are obsessed with our fair city's inadequate public transport, so I'll probably just ride around on the Tube and those double-decker buses for a couple of days. Seriously though, I'd like to get out in the countryside, see the sights and sample every kind of ale I can find.

Andrew York: As you know, I love to come over whenever I can. I want to have some real ale and enjoy the green countryside. Time permitting, I'd like a visit to Hampstead Heath to pay respects to some of my favorite trees there.

Bill Kanengiser: Unfortunately, we have such a tight schedule that our sight-seeing might be limited to a roadside blur and the top ten from 'Michelin's Guide to the Green Rooms of Rural Britain'. If there is any time, though, I sure would like to hang out at Stonehenge.

A last question — where do you feel you are headed as a group? What do you want to lay down as your mark?

Andrew York: I'd like to see the group move away from transcriptions of traditional pieces and towards newer music that explores the unique potential of guitar quartet. I feel that is essential not only for our ultimate success, but for the medium of four guitars in general.

Bill Kanengiser: Well, I don't know for sure, but I do know that since Andy's arrival the group has gotten more in touch with our American musical roots and that we're having a ball playing together. I guess we could claim to be on a quest to make the guitar quartet as viable a concert medium as the string quartet by expanding the repertoire, popularizing the genre and charming the pants off audiences around the globe. Or it might just be a gig. Honestly, we don't usually think so long term about what we're doing, about how posterity will view us. We're just trying to create something that we like, have fun doing it and hope that other folks like it too.

Scott Tennant: My view of it is simple: to play music that we love, as best we can.

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