

Repertoire and Interpretation

With regard to musical periods and composers, what should be in every guitarist's repertoire?

The Renaissance and classical periods are good starting points for beginners since it is easy to find relatively simple works in these eras. Examples of Renaissance composers are Milán, Narváez, Mudarra, Dowland, da Milano; a sampling of classical composers includes Sor, Giuliani, Carcassi, and Carulli. From there, one can branch out into other periods, such as the Baroque (Bach, Weiss, de Visée, Scarlatti), the 19th century (Tarrega, Paganini, Coste, Albéniz, Granados), the 20th century (Villa-Lobos, Barrios, Lauro, Llobet, Rodrigo, Turina, Torroba, Ponce, Tansman, Castelnuovo-Tedesco), and the contemporary (Brouwer, Henze, Britten, Dodgson, etc.).

Students should be exposed to a wide variety of styles and periods of history. If they later choose to specialize, they will at least have had a varied background on which to base such decisions.

How does one keep abreast of new music for guitar by contemporary composers?

For one of the most up-to-date catalogues of published guitar music, write to Guitar Solo, 514 Bryant St., San Francisco, CA 94107. You can also write to individual publishers and request their latest guitar catalogues. For a list of some of the many publishers who are active in contemporary guitar music, see page 54.

In addition, listen to (or at least read reviews about) concerts and recordings that include new music. There are two American publications that regularly review new guitar music: *Guitar Review* (40 West 25th St., 12th Floor, New York, NY 10010) and *Soundboard* (PO Box 1240, Claremont, CA 91711). The British monthly magazine *Classical Guitar* (Ashley Mark Publishing Co., 1 and 2 Vance Court, Trans Britannia Enterprise Park, Blayden on Tyne, U.K. NE21 5NH; www.ashleymark.co.uk) is also a good source for new music reviews.

Music from contemporary composers has the reputation of being dissonant, "difficult," and unpopular with mainstream classical music audiences. In the guitar world, do you think audiences are resistant to new music, and if so, what can be done to improve this situation?

Just as not all Italian food is pasta, not all contemporary music is difficult and thorny. There are many different styles within the category of "contemporary," enough to offer a variety for all tastes. One can find everything from Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, jazz, bluegrass, Renaissance, and folk influences to more intellectual and "difficult" idioms. And within the realm of a particular category—such as atonal music—one can find a veritable panoply of approaches to lyricism, rhythm, texture, and color.

Harmonic delineations between tonal and atonal also vary considerably, not only between composers but within a composer's own body of work. Cuban composer Leo Brouwer, for example, has written in a variety of styles throughout his career. Compare his *La Espiral Eterna* (1971) to *El Decameron Negro* (1981). The harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, timbral, and structural language in these two works is strikingly different. And in concert, a distinguishing visual component is created by all the unusual

Repertoire and Interpretation

performing techniques required in *La Espiral Eterna*. For example, there is a section that calls for the player to slither up and down the fingerboard and eventually sail past the frets toward the bridge. Visually and aurally, the effect is stunningly sensual. In another section, the performer taps in an improvised fashion with both hands on the fingerboard, creating the effect of a drummer in ecstasy.

Lack of familiarity with an individual work or compositional language may make it more difficult for some people to respond positively to a piece of music at first hearing. I remember hearing Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal* for the first time some 30 years ago and thinking it was difficult music to enjoy. Now, however, having played it hundreds of times, I find it to be a beautifully moving and engaging work, written in a clear and accessible language.

I believe it is the performer's duty and responsibility to introduce audiences to outstanding 20th-century music. Unfortunately, not all performers have the background or sensibility to make sound judgments about quality and presentation. There have been many occasions when I have felt positively tortured by having to hear poorly written, uninspired, or defiantly antagonistic and abrasive music. But the wonderful works that do enter the literature are ample compensation.

Following the example of Julian Bream, who has been responsible for introducing many of the finest new guitar pieces (by such composers as Britten, Walton, Henze, Brouwer, Arnold, Berkeley, Takemitsu, and Tippett), I have also commissioned and premiered numerous solo and chamber works, including nine concertos with orchestra. These works include John Duarte's *Appalachian Dreams* (solo), Bruce MacCombie's *Nightshade Rounds* (solo, and version with string orchestra), Joan Tower's *Clocks* (solo) and *Snowdreams* (flute and guitar), Leo Brouwer's *El Decameron Negro* (solo), David Diamond's *Concert Piece* (guitar and string quartet), and with orchestra, Lukas Foss' *American Landscapes*, Joseph Schwantner's *From Afar*, Ivana Themmen's *Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, John Corigliano's *Troubadours*, Tan Dun's *Yi 2: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, Aaron Kernis' *Double Concerto for Guitar and Violin*, Christopher Rouse's *Concert de Gaudi*, and Ami Maayani's *Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*. (See *Concerti for Guitar and Orchestra Performed by Sharon Isbin*, page 68, and *Selected Recordings by Sharon Isbin*, page 84.)

Although I must confess that I've never been a fan of all-contemporary music concerts, the purpose they serve in giving new works the opportunity to be heard cannot be discounted. I prefer instead diversified programming, in which more familiar idioms offset the freshness and creativity of new works, and premieres aren't pitted against each other in a way that taxes both audience and critics.

Repertoire and Interpretation

How far do you think a performer can and should go in modifying or embellishing a piece of composed music?

A jazz, pop, or country musician is likely to answer that question differently from most classical players. Having heard exquisite jazz renderings of “composed” pieces from Bach to Ravel, I embrace the idea of truly improvised settings carried out with taste, skill, and creative artistry. It’s when something is done halfway that expectations often become misleading and styles clash.

Some classical works actually require embellishment. For example, Bruce MacCombie’s *Nightshade Rounds* and Leo Brouwer’s *La Espiral Eterna* both require the performer to improvise certain passages. Cadenzas in solos, chamber works, and concertos have traditionally demanded input from the performer, especially in music written before the 20th century. Works by Haydn, Carulli, and Giuliani, to name a few, offer excellent opportunities for performers to write their own cadenzas.

Sometimes that practice extends to contemporary concertos as well. For example, in Joseph Schwantner’s *From Afar* for guitar and orchestra, written for me and the St. Louis Symphony in 1988, the composer asked that I complete the second half of his cadenza (other soloists have the option of using my version or of creating their own); the same is true in Lukas Foss’ concerto *American Landscapes*, written for me in 1989. In Baroque music, embellishment was expected. Modern players must apply principles of Baroque embellishment in order to avoid misrepresenting the composer’s intentions. Failure to do so often leads to dull, inept performances.

Finally, when making transcriptions or arrangements within the classical music mode, modifications are usually necessary. The challenge, however, is to preserve the composer’s original concept and intent while creating a setting that sounds completely idiomatic and natural on the guitar.

You’ve played with vocalists and a percussionist as well as with chamber groups and orchestras. Do you approach ensemble playing differently than you do solo playing?

Whereas solo playing gives total control to one player, ensemble playing demands an engaging interaction between musicians. A soloist is always in the forefront; an ensemble player must know when to lead, blend, or recede, according to the demands of the score. In an ideal ensemble, all performers listen to one another with a keen awareness, respond to each other’s artistry, and breathe and move together in shared rhythms and phrases, mutual intensity, and beauty. It is a true union of soul and spirit, one whose physicality is unmatched by verbal forms of communication.

To achieve an expressive and dynamic unity, I seek musical partners who will relate to and complement my own artistic aesthetic. There must be honesty and open-mindedness in the process of working together, and a willingness and desire to explore new ideas and approaches. When rehearsing chamber music, all players should have the

Repertoire and Interpretation

ability to articulate thoughts and impressions with clarity and understanding. When there is disagreement, trust and respect will allow them to make intelligent choices and to support those decisions. And if a more convincing approach emerges later, performers should have the ability to recognize and embrace it.

Spontaneity is also a goal. One of the hallmarks of an exciting solo performance (where there are few limits), spontaneity is important in chamber and orchestral playing as well. Players must be ever sensitive to the moment and flexible enough to successfully create unplanned ideas or gestures. This is the magic that makes each performance alive and unique.

Since playing classical guitar means practicing and performing alone most of the time, it can be a joy to work with others, musically and socially. Some of the inspiring artists I've performed with include Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Nigel Kennedy, Benita Valente, Carol Wincenc, the Emerson String Quartet, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Larry Coryell, Laurindo Almeida, Michael Hedges, Herb Ellis, Stanley Jordan, Thiago de Mello, and, of course, many symphony orchestras and conductors. Ideas from colleagues rejuvenate and inspire, and often cross over to kindle new insight in solo repertoire as well. It is liberating to escape for a time from the confines of one's own thought process and be recharged with new artistic visions.

Because chamber and orchestral playing develops musical character in invaluable ways, it is an important part of my teaching at the Juilliard School. It introduces a new world of repertoire, most of which could never be played on solo guitar. When performing with others, one creates, in effect, a new instrument, one born of all the timbres and dynamics within the ensemble. These new colors and powerful dynamic levels expand the horizons of the guitarist to embrace everything from the human voice to an entire orchestra. This enlarged palette of color and lyricism has definitely enriched my playing, and it is a wonderful tool in teaching as well. Since chamber and orchestral music demand a rhythmic precision and awareness that is all too easy to ignore in solo playing, students learn rhythmic skills that can inform all their repertoire. My guitar students have the opportunity to perform an entire concert of chamber music every year in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. These ensembles have included guitar with voice, flute, oboe, percussion, piano, harp, mandolin, string quartet, and chamber orchestra.

Repertoire and Interpretation

In what situations do you change the tuning of your guitar for a composition —tuning the sixth string down to D, for example?

The most common tuning changes are: lowering the sixth string to D for works in D major or minor; changing the fifth string to G and the sixth to D for works in G major or minor; and changing the third string to F# for Renaissance lute works. I've also played with the sixth string tuned to C and with a capo on various frets (as on my *Love Songs and Lullabies* recording with soprano Benita Valente, baritone Thomas Allen, and percussionist Thiago de Mello, EMI/Virgin Classics 61480).

The most elaborate retuning I've come across requires that all strings be changed (C. Domeniconi's *Koyunbaba* is one example). In this case, you can either choose to wrestle with fate and watch your strings slip out of tune in this piece and/or in those that follow, or you can use two different guitars, each tuned accordingly hours ahead of time.

How do you handle rests in a guitar score?

A player should decide how to interpret a rest based on the musical and historical context of each situation. When playing transcriptions, for example, one must take into consideration the decay time of the different instruments. Because the guitar has a faster decay and a smaller sound than the piano or harpsichord, there are many times when it is desirable to allow a bass note on the guitar to ring through a rest. In the opening measures of J. S. Bach's "Prelude pour la Luth o Cembal" from the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro* (BWV 998), for instance, the keyboard notation indicates bass-note rests that do not sound convincing when played on the guitar.

The image shows a musical score for the opening of J.S. Bach's "Prelude pour la Luth o Cembal" (BWV 998). It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 12/8 time signature. A circled '6' with "= D" indicates the sixth string is tuned down. The notation includes a bass note on the first string (D) that rings through a rest in the second measure. The upper voices consist of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Because the tonality remains constant throughout the measure, a guitarist can let the bass note decay naturally rather than stopping it abruptly on the third eighth note. This gracefully diminishing bass note reinforces the harmonic richness of both the instrument and the phrase. Without it, the upper voices float without a foundation. If one carries out this approach for the remainder of the piece, a sinuous beauty emerges that would be lacking if each rest were followed literally.

Repertoire and Interpretation

An example where it would be important, however, to stop the bass note on the rest is measure 54 from the Prelude of Bach's Suite BWV 996:

The image shows a single measure of music, measure 54, from the Prelude of Bach's Suite BWV 996. The notation is written on a single staff in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 8/8. The measure is divided into three beats. The first beat contains a half note chord (G2, B1, D2). The second beat contains a half note chord (G2, B1, D2) with a fermata over the notes. The third beat contains a half note chord (G2, B1, D2) with a fermata over the notes. The notation includes various performance markings such as accents, slurs, and dynamic markings (p). The number '52' is written above the first staff line.

Since the new phrase begins on the second eighth note, it would only confuse the structure to allow the low G to continue ringing after the first beat.