



Music of the Human Spirit

David Leisner

guitar

Ginastera
Sculthorpe
Winslow
Glass
Poulenc
Harrison
Rorem



A z i c a

MUSIC OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT - Liner Notes by David Leisner

These are seven of my favorite guitar pieces from the last half of the 20th century. With the exception of Francis Poulenc, I have known all of these composers, to varying degrees, and each one has been an influence on my own work as a composer. So this recording bears a very personal stamp. This is also music which shuns the cerebral preferences of much 20th-century composition and balances heart, mind and spirit with more equal weight. It is music of the human spirit.

ALBERTO GINASTERA (1916-1983) remains one of the most underrated great composers of the 20th century, and his *Sonata* is, in my view, along with Britten's *Nocturnal*, one of the two towering masterpieces of the solo guitar literature to date. Written in 1976 as a commission by Robert Bialek, owner of a record and book store in Washington, D.C., at the request of Brazilian guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima, this work was performed exclusively by Barbosa-Lima until it was a required test-piece for the 1981 Geneva International Guitar Competition, in which I was the Silver Medalist. In the short time we contestants had to prepare this just-published score, I felt an immediate and deep connection. Ginastera, who lived in Geneva at the time and was present for the competition, gave exceptional praise for my performance of it. When the competition was over, I asked him if he would be interested to coach me on the piece. His eyes lit up, and we worked on it at his apartment the next day. The session was, of course, full of revelations. My favorite memory of the afternoon was the moment when he asked me to play a very loud passage even louder. I tried. He said, "louder". I tried again. He said, "more". Another apparently unsuccessful attempt, and he growled, "BRRRRREAK THE GEETAR!"

In his preface to the published score, Ginastera wrote: "The first movement, Esordio, is a solemn prelude, followed by a song which was inspired by Kéua music and which concludes with an abbreviated repetition of these two elements. The second movement, Scherzo, which must be played 'il piu presto possibile', is an interplay of shadow and light, of nocturnal and magical ambience, of dynamic contrasts, distant dances, of surrealistic impressions, such as I had used in earlier works. Near the end, the lute theme of Sixtus Beckmesser appears as a phantasmagoria. The third movement, Canto, is lyrical and rhapsodic, expressive and breathless like a love poem. It is connected to the last movement, Finale, a quick, spirited rondo which recalls the strong, bold rhythms of the music of the pampas. Combinations of 'rasgueado' and 'tambora' percussion effects, mixed with other effects of metallic timbre or the rebounding of strings, give a special color to this rapid, violent movement, which overall acquires the character of a 'toccata'."

This is actually the second recording I have made of this piece. The first was an analog recording I made independently in 1983 in RCA's famous Studio A, with veterans Elizabeth Ostrow as producer and Sal Salvatore as engineer. Also on that disc-to-be were the pieces by Glass and Rorem that are included here (the Glass now re-recorded and the Rorem not), as well as a short piece of mine. The album, which was to be contracted to the Nonesuch label, never saw the light of day because of the onset of the hand condition, focal dystonia, which then plagued me for 12 years. It would have been the first recording of the Ginastera *Sonata*.

Recognized as the most important composer of Australia, as well as a composer of international significance, PETER SCULTHORPE (b. 1929) has written a work of deeply felt spiritual substance for the guitar, *From Kakadu*. It is dedicated to John Williams, was commissioned by the Shell Darwin International Guitar Festival and completed in 1993. Fortunately for guitarists, it is not the only work for our instrument that Peter has written. There is also *Nourlangie* for guitar, percussion and strings (of which I gave the American premiere), an earlier guitar concerto, *Nocturno*, which he

plans at some point to revise, another brief solo piece, *Into the Dreaming*, *Tropic* for two guitars and chamber ensemble, *Simori* for flute and guitar, and a more recent work for guitar and string quartet, which Peter described in a letter to me as 'like a long pop-song'.

About *From Kakadu*, the composer writes: "The terrain of Kakadu National Park, in the north of Australia, stretches from rugged mountain plateaux to coastal tidal plains. *From Kakadu* is the sixth work of mine that takes this terrain as its point of departure. Several of the works employ similar melodic material; and much of this work is based upon the main theme of my orchestral piece, *Kakadu* (1988). *From Kakadu* is in four sections: Grave; Comodo; Misterioso; Cantando. The first and third sections are based upon the *Kakadu* melody; and the fourth section grows from it into a long, singing line. The work is an intimate one, being concerned with the deep contentment that I feel whenever I return to Australia's outback. This feeling is ever-present in the dance-like second section, and in the singing line of the final Cantando, and in its counterpoint."

RICHARD WINSLOW (b. 1917) is a composer whose name is unfamiliar to many in the music world. He made his mark as a professor of music at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he taught for 34 years. During that time, in addition to his teaching of conventional Western music, he co-founded the World Music program, one of the first of its kind anywhere, as well as organized repeated visits by John Cage and other important figures of the (then) Avant-Garde. While his own music was very different from theirs, he worked tirelessly and with an open mind to support the work of composers in whom he believed. In light of this and the significant quality of his own work, his lack of interest in self-promotion is astounding. The performances he sought were all local, seemingly just so he could hear them and move on. For many years, he wrote a choral work every week for the Wesleyan choir to sing in church on Sundays, similar to Bach. His catalogue is enormous - operas and other theater pieces, as well as works for orchestra, chorus, voice and chamber music. Almost all of Winslow's music is in a straightforward tonal language, a courageous and rebellious act during a time when atonality and experimentalism of all sorts held court in the world of the compositional elite. In the early 70's, I had the good fortune to be his student at Wesleyan, and he became not only my compositional guide, but a true mentor.

In a program note, Dick Winslow wrote: "The piece at hand was written out of interest in the work of David Leisner, in 1975. Use of Stephen Foster's tune, 'Hard Times, Come Again No More', traces back to my boyhood delight with the old Nathaniel Shilkret arrangements of Foster songs on Victor Records, featuring male quartets and unreal lyric tenors of the sort that seem to have died out after Richard Crooks. 'Variations' here includes not only workings-over of specific factors of the subject, time, but also stream-of-consciousness responses to it." Dick had written the piece in Santa Fe, during a time of great personal trials. Years later, when I returned to public performance after my own years of misery from my hand injury, I used it as a kind of "theme song" for my comeback. The work is in a mostly conventional theme-and-variations form, with the variations divided into two "Acts" (always the theater-minded composer). In the letter that accompanied the first version of the score, Dick wrote: "I've beaten my brains out trying to stay, a) within the spirit of the guitar, b) within the dictates of the Stephen Foster material...As to b), I was in fact interested to see whether I could in any way be 'personal', 'original', while sticking to Foster's harmonies." In a later correspondence, he wrote, "When it was all over, I could not believe I'd really committed myself to such an antique idiom - harmonic materials - wondered whether I'd lost my grip. Then I'd read it and find, no no, it's not the idiom at issue at all, it's the architecture." It is, in fact, astonishing, the way this masterpiece builds quietly and inexorably towards its moving and surprising conclusion.

The music of PHILIP GLASS (b. 1937) always has and probably always will elicit mixed responses. Listeners generally either love it or hate it. Some believe, as I do, that he is one of the most important American composers, while others dismiss his work as something of a bad joke. One fact is undeniable, though: Of America's contemporary composers, he is the most famous.

I met Philip Glass on the subway. Despite his fame, he has always travelled by subway in New York, and continues to do so today. (Remember, this is the man who was a plumber and a cabdriver, even after the American premiere of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Metropolitan Opera House). I was wearing a T-shirt with an unusual photo of Charles Ives on it, and Phil motioned to me, asked where I got the shirt, and we chatted. In the early 1980's I attended a concert of the Philip Glass Ensemble at Town Hall in New York and reintroduced myself afterwards. On the program was the violin solo, the *Fourth Knee Play*, from *Einstein*, and it occurred to me then that it might sound terrific as an arrangement for the guitar. He was skeptical, but intrigued and decided to let me try. Phil has always been clever about keeping strict control over his music, and in order to obtain this piece, I was told to go to his high-powered lawyer's office, where they removed a copy of the music, much to my amazement, from a vault! Once I worked on it, I saw that it would be a note-for-note transcription, with the exception of one repeated-note passage, in which I simply put every other note up an octave. Soon after, I played it for Phil in his apartment, and he was very impressed and surprised that it worked as well as it did.

The "knee plays" from *Einstein on the Beach* are interludes, named after the human knee, whose function, of course, is to join. In this one, there are three kinds of material, all of which are developed throughout the opera. The opening section centers around a striking harmonic progression. In his book, *Music by Philip Glass*, he writes: "What I was looking for was a way of combining harmonic progressions with the rhythmic structure I had been developing, to produce a new overall structure." Then he goes on to describe this particular progression, which at first "appears to be a traditional cadential formula, the time-honored closing phrase which, in a variety of forms, became highly developed during the Baroque period and lasted well into the present. However, there is an altered or pivotal chord in the middle that results in a closing chord a half-step below what one would normally expect. It is this lowered resolution of the cadence that motivates its repetition." The chord pattern is f minor, Db major, Bbb major or A major, B major, E major. This section is followed by a slower, very lyrical passage, which eventually became material for his next operas, *Satyagraha* and *Akhmat*, as well. After a brief return to the opening material follows an extended passage of scales, using his typical "additive process", which he describes as follows: "Additive process is one of those very simple ideas that can quickly lead to very complicated procedures. It can easily be explained: A musical grouping or measure of, say, five notes is repeated several times, then is followed by a measure of six notes (also repeated), then seven, then eight, and so on. A simple figure can expand and then contract in many different ways, maintaining the same general melodic configuration but, because of the addition (or subtraction) of one note, it takes on a very different rhythmic shape." In Glass' music, the phrase as structural element is replaced by a group of repeated phrases, which, as I think of it, is like taking music from the third into the fourth dimension.

Another great American composer is LOU HARRISON (b. 1917), who composed this delightful little *Serenade* in 1952. I remember riding one day in an old Mercedes in Aptos, California, with my partner, Ralph, and I in the back seat, with our friends Lou and his beloved partner of several decades, Bill (now deceased) in the front. They were arguing at top decibel level about driving, with a vehemence such as we had never encountered. It's hard to reconcile that image with that of a man who wrote such gentle music as this, music written as if in paradise. Once out of the car, though, all was lovey-dovey between them. On the manuscript of this piece, Lou wrote: "This *Serenade* for guitar was written for Frank Wigglesworth as a part of a private letter to him. I hope, then, that he will not mind my making public a portion of our correspondence!" Also on the manuscript, Lou, ever the experimenter with systems of intonation, wrote: "Anyone who just might own a guitar with movable frets should arrange those to play the 'Intense Diatonic' (Syntanon Diatonic), which is the 'vocal' major scale." As it happens, the piece is written for an unusual tuning, with the A string tuned down to G. I hope Lou will forgive me for playing it in the normal tuning, since I have played it that way for years so as to be able to pair this miniature easily with other pieces in concerts.

FRANCIS POULENC (1899-1963) was the only composer in this collection whom I did not know. This great Frenchman wrote only once for the guitar - this short, spare beauty, a *Sarabande*, written for one of the best guitarists of the 20th century, Ida Presti. One can imagine him intending this music for the luscious sound that Presti produced like no other on her instrument. Composed in 1960, at the end of his life, the piece is written in that stark, religious, timeless style that characterized, for instance, his later choral pieces.

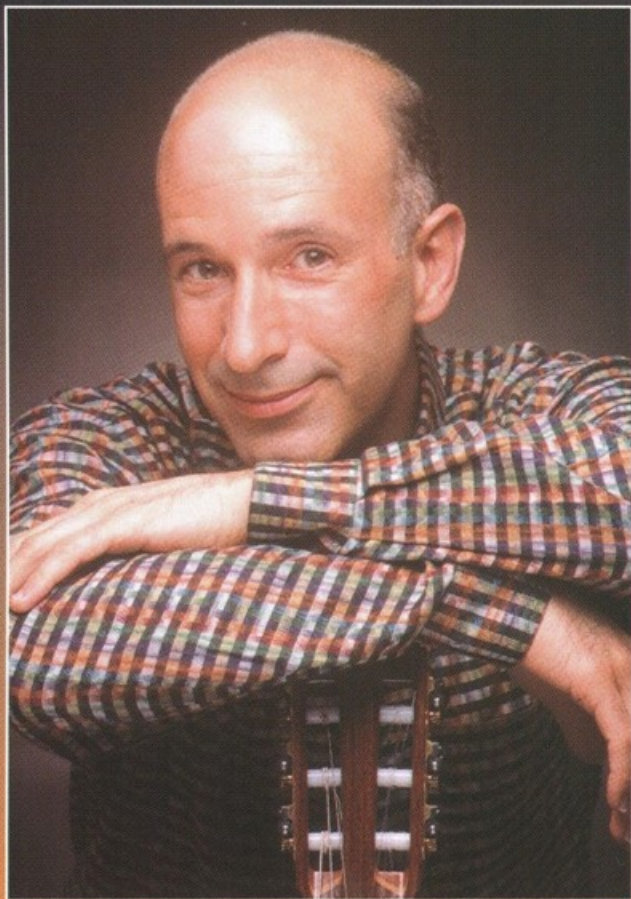
NED ROREM (b. 1923) is unique in that he is as brilliant a writer as he is a composer. Best known for his prickly, observant diaries and his sometimes-charming, sometimes-urgent, always-masterful art songs, he is also the composer of a large amount of well-honed, colorful instrumental music.

When I first moved to New York in 1979, Ned was one of the first composers I sought out (Virgil Thomson was the very first). His music and mind and life were stimulating to me, and I hoped we might share something in common. We have connected often and warmly since then, though we were never close. Ned, who can be difficult with some people, has always been very kind to me and offered words of praise for both my guitar playing and my vocal composition. And, I, admiring his music, have recorded and often performed two of his three works with guitar, which, besides the solo piece, include *Romeo and Juliet*, recorded with flutist Fenwick Smith on the Etcetera label, and the more recent *Songs of Sadness* for baritone, clarinet, cello and guitar.

The *Suite* was commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra for a performance at the Blossom Music Center by guitarist Joseph Breznikar. I gave its New York premiere in Merkin Hall in 1982, in a concert of 9 premieres by 8 American composers (Ziffrin, Luening, Pritchard, Consoli, Thomson, Rorem and Winslow). Ned wrote: "This *Suite* was written in the early spring of 1980. Originally I thought of illustrating with music Oscar Wilde's beautiful tale, 'The Star Child' (hence the poetic indication for the first movement). But the idea gave way to an abstract suite." This recording was made in 1983, at the session described above, in the note on Ginastera. Had it been released then, it would have been the work's premiere recording, but there have since been a few recorded performances. Unlike the Glass and Ginastera pieces, which I recorded a second time for this album, I felt I had done about as good a job on the Rorem as I was going to do, so I decided to leave the 1983 version intact.

This album is dedicated to my father, Elkan Leisner, who loved the adventure of all things new.

This Azica release was recorded "live to two-track" at the recording sessions. No mixing was done subsequent to the recording sessions. The intent of this technique is to capture the artist's performance without alteration by the recording process. There have been no analog stages since the original analog to digital conversion at the sessions. All editing and transfers have been done in the digital domain to preserve the sound quality produced during the artist's performance.



David Leisner is an extraordinarily versatile musician with a multi-faceted career as an electrifying performing artist, a distinguished composer, and a master teacher. Regarded as one of America's leading classical guitarists, his superb musicianship and provocative programming have been applauded by critics and audiences around the world.

Mr. Leisner's career as a guitarist began auspiciously with top prizes in both the 1975 Toronto and 1981 Geneva International Guitar Competitions. In the 1980s, a disabling hand injury, focal dystonia, cut off his blossoming performing career in mid-stream and forced him to stop playing for nearly a decade. Through a pioneering approach to technique based on his understanding of the physical aspects of playing the guitar, Leisner gradually rehabilitated himself. Now completely recovered, he has once again resumed an active performing career, earning accolades wherever he plays.

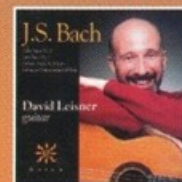
His recent seasons were highlighted by an innovative three-concert series at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York City, which included the first all-Bach guitar recital in New York's history. In addition, he made acclaimed debuts in Greece, the Philippines and Mexico, and performed on concert series throughout the US and Europe. He is also a regular at the Santa Fe, Vail Valley, Cape and Islands, Bargemusic and Angel Fire Chamber Music Festivals, performing with flutist Eugenia Zukerman, baritone Kurt Ollmann, violinist Ida Kavafian and many others. Celebrated for expanding the guitar repertoire, David Leisner has premiered works by many of today's most important composers, including Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, Philip Glass, Richard Rodney Bennett, Peter Sculthorpe and Osvaldo Golijov.

Mr. Leisner is himself a highly respected composer noted for the emotional and dramatic power of his music. His *Dances in the Madhouse*, in both its original version for violin and guitar and as an arrangement for orchestra, has received hundreds of performances. Recent commissioners include the Fairfield Orchestra (CT), Red Cedar Chamber Music (IA), and the Twentieth Century Unlimited Series (NM).

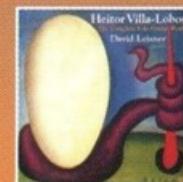
A distinguished teacher, David Leisner is currently on the faculties of the New England Conservatory and the Manhattan School of Music. Primarily self-taught as both guitarist and composer, he briefly studied guitar with John Duarte, David Starobin and Angela Gilardino and composition with Richard Winslow, Virgil Thomson, Charles Turner and David Del Tredici.

For more information, please visit David Leisner's website: www.davidleisner.com
Guitar by John Gilbert. Strings by D'Addario.

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Music of the Human Spirit

Sonata Op. 47 *Alberto Ginastera* 12:15

1. Esordio 3:12
2. Scherzo 2:53
3. Canto 3:34
4. Finale 2:27

From Kakadu *Peter Sculthorpe* 10:15

5. Grave 2:54
6. Comodo 2:22
7. Misterioso 1:23
8. Cantando 3:22

Variations on a Tune of Stephen Foster *Richard Winslow* 13:51

- | Part One | Part Two |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 9. The Tune 1:06 | 16. Variation I 1:10 |
| 10. Variation I :35 | 17. Variation II 1:02 |
| 11. Variation II :35 | 18. Variation III :38 |
| 12. Variation III :56 | 19. Variation IV :35 |
| 13. Variation IV :58 | 20. Variation V 2:55 |
| 14. Variation V :52 | |
| 15. Variation VI 1:50 | |

21. **Fourth Knee Play** *Philip Glass* (from *Einstein on the Beach*) 13:09

22. **Serenade** *Lou Harrison* 2:42

23. **Sarabande** *Francis Poulenc* 1:48

Suite Ned Rorem 11:07

24. Like a Distant Shower of Silver 1:32
25. Rollicking :36
26. Allegretto 1:23
27. Melancholy 2:50
28. Rapid, like raindrops 1:11
29. Loud and fast and dry 1:59
30. Brisk - Maestoso 1:16

TOTAL RUNNING TIME 1:05:27

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More Suite: Recorded in 1983, RCA Studio A -

Elizabeth Ostrow, producer

Sal Salvatore, engineer



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David Leisner, guitar

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