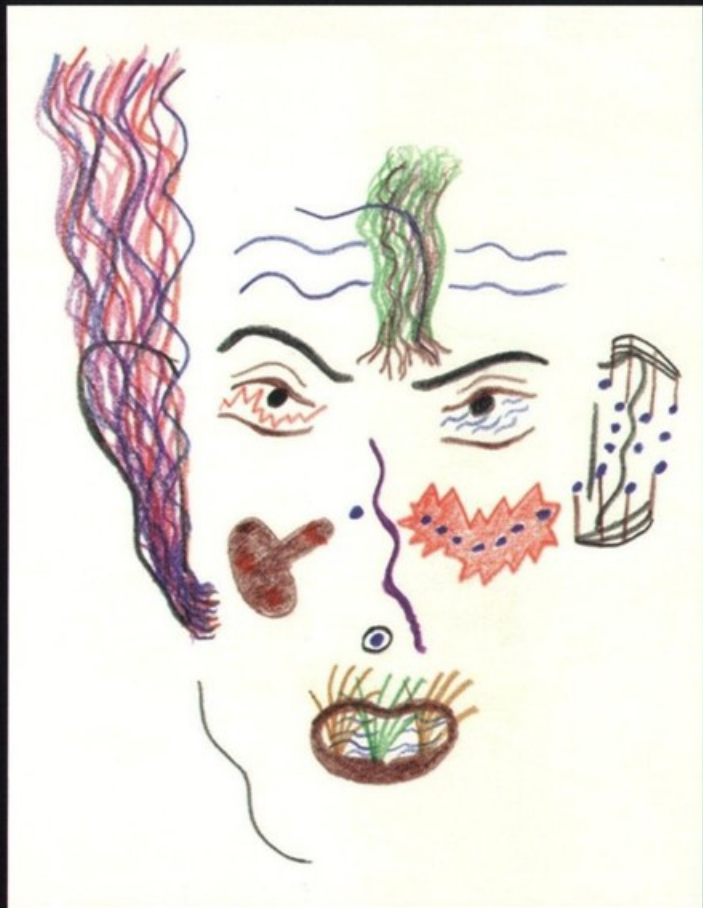


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SELF-PORTRAIT

Liner notes by David Leisner

The composer/performer has been a significant presence throughout musical history, from the ancient *qin* players to the troubadours of the Middle Ages to the virtuosi of 19th-century Europe to the folk, jazz and popular music singers and instrumentalists of recent times. Throughout the centuries, the proportion of activity between composition and interpretation has shifted, sometimes considerably. Perhaps no more dramatic example of this has been the progression from the great composer/performers of the 19th and early 20th century to the separation of composition and performance as two distinct disciplines in the majority of the 20th century. This coincided with and was expressive of the Age of Specialization. In my view, this professional rift contributed greatly to the ivory-tower quality of much 20th-century music and the resulting distance between musical creators and their audience.

Many classical musicians are now gravitating once again to the composer/performer model. There are currently two types (perhaps they have always existed) - one who performs his/her own music exclusively, like Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and the other, like myself, who performs both original work as well as music by others. I have discovered over the years how extraordinarily difficult it is in this era to maintain this dual career, particularly as a soloist and also as one whose compositional activity goes well beyond my chosen instrument. The Age of Specialization has raised the standards of not only the professional perfection of each occupation, but also the level of promotion required to reach and maintain an acceptable level of success. To

combine the two careers now demands a time commitment, focus and intensity that borders on the heroic.

Difficulties notwithstanding, the composer/performer has the distinct advantage of understanding music from all sides. He/she has an intimate familiarity with the creative process and all its attending details, while knowing how to effectively communicate those nuances and meanings within a perceivable structure. At the same time, this close view could also be seen as detrimental when it comes to a composer performing his/her own work. Composers are not always their own best interpreters! While composers' recordings of their own music are certainly illuminating as to the authenticity of its origins and its subtleties, it can be equally misleading in other ways. Even basic elements, like tempo or character, can vary considerably, depending on the day or one's mood. Also, one might be far more inclined to interpret someone else's music with a greater objectivity about pacing or issues of emphasis or emotion. In fact, I would be horrified if someone listens to this recording of my own compositions and takes it as the way to play this music. On the contrary, this is only a document of how I felt about these pieces at the time they were recorded. I sincerely hope that others will play them differently.

The Sonata, **Nel Mezzo**, is my most ambitious work so far for solo guitar. It was written in 1998, in the midst of a long inner struggle with mid-life issues. An acute awareness of my life's limitations, in time on earth and professionally, drew me into a deep, underlying depression. This was further complicated by the aftermath of my recently-ended 12-year bout with the debilitating

hand condition, focal dystonia. As a result this work became an intensely personal response to the ubiquitous mid-life crisis, evolving into a combination of a musical diary and a psychiatrist.

The Italian phrase, "*nel mezzo*", means "in the middle", and is a reference to the opening of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* - "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ch  la diritta via era smarrita*" (In the middle of our life's journey, I found myself in a dark forest, after I had strayed from the direct path). It also implies the claustrophobic feeling of being caught or squeezed in the middle. The first movement is in a modified version of *sonata allegro* form that is influenced by my interest in spiral form. Its Italian title, "*Urto*", has multiple meanings - collision, impact, shock, bump, attack, onset - all of which are relevant. The lyrical middle movement, "*Lamento*", is in A-B-A form. The outer sections are marked "*sconsolato, perso*" (disconsolate, lost), while the middle section centers around a brief ostinato and is marked, "*con delizia macabra*" (with macabre delight). The final movement, "*No!*", is a loud toccata for chords, in a rondo form with three quieter, slower episodes that include a contrapuntal discussion and two passages that quote the American folk lullaby, "Hushabye".

A miscellaneous collection from 1985-86, **Four Pieces** brings together revisions of two earlier pieces, "Episode" and "Dance" with two works written specifically for my good friend and fellow guitarist/composer, Benjamin Verdery, to whom the whole set is dedicated. This is light music, bagatelles if you will, that draws its inspiration from the worlds of folk and popular music.

Passacaglia and Toccata (1982) is the earliest work here. While all my music is tonal, some is written in a diatonic style, while others, like this work and *Nel Mezzo*, are in a chromatic language. The "Passacaglia" is an indirect homage to Bartok, while the "Toccata" is a direct homage to Ginastera, who was also indebted to Bartok. The Passacaglia theme is inverted to become the theme of the Toccata. The same notes also provided the thematic material for my cello and guitar piece, *Three Moons*, written several years later.

Like much of the music in this program, the three **Freedom Fantasies** (1992, revised 2003) are rooted in the vernacular, each being a free-flowing set of variations on a well-known African-American Spiritual. The theme appears in the middle of the first fantasy, at the end of the second, and at both beginning and end of the third. The blues and jazz language of these pieces seem to be not only a natural result of the Spirituals upon which they are based, but also the right language to express musical thoughts about freedom, in its various political as well as social meanings.

Intended to be an encore piece, "**Billy Boy**" **Variations** was written while on a performing residency in West Virginia in 1983. Though its origins are in the British Isles, "Billy Boy" became an Appalachian folk tune, and I've varied it in a traditional, quasi-19th-century style.

This is a collection of my complete works to date for solo guitar. Had economics not been a limiting factor, I might have preferred the first whole album of my music to contain my vocal or chamber or orchestral music. But, hopefully, another time...



DAVID LEISNER is an extraordinarily versatile musician with a distinguished, multi-faceted career as guitarist, composer and teacher. Regarded as one of America's leading classical guitarists, he is increasingly recognized on the international scene for his significant contributions to composition and education.

Mr. Leisner's performance career began auspiciously with top prizes in both the 1975 Toronto and 1981 Geneva International Guitar Competitions. 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 Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Greece, the Philippines and Mexico, and performed on concert series throughout the US and Europe. He is also a regular at many 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. In addition to his solo recordings for Azica, he has also recorded concertos for the Naxos and Opus One labels and chamber music for Telarc, Etcetera and Koch.

As a composer, Mr. Leisner is 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. Leisner's music has been performed worldwide by such eminent artists as Sanford Sylvan, Paul Sperry, Juliana Gondek, Susan Narucki, D'Anna

Fortunato, Eugenia Zukerman, Benjamin Verdery, St. Lawrence String Quartet, Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, Cavatina Duo, Pearl and Gray Duo, Saturday Brass Quintet, and orchestras such as the Fresno Philharmonic and the Springfield (MA and MO) and Amarillo Symphonies. Works available on CD are on the Sony Classical, ABC, Dorian, Cedille, Centaur, Town Hall, Signum, Acoustic Music, Athena and Barking Dog labels.

Recent works and commissions include *A Timely Procession* for baritone Wolfgang Holzmair and string quartet, *Vision of Orpheus* for the St. Lawrence String Quartet and Leisner, *Embrace of Peace* for the Fairfield Orchestra, *Battlefield Requiem* for cellist Laurence Lesser and the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble, *Fidelity* for tenor Bruce Fowler, baritone Robert Osborne and pianist Warren Jones, and *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* for the Saturday Brass Quintet and the 50th anniversary of Fairfield University. He has received composition grants from the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the American Music Center, the Alice M. Ditson Fund, the New England Foundation for the Arts and Meet the Composer.

An eminent teacher, David Leisner served for 22 years on the faculty of the New England Conservatory and is currently co-chair of the guitar department of the Manhattan School of Music. Primarily self-taught as both guitarist and composer, he briefly studied guitar with John Duarte, David Starobin and Angelo Gilardino and composition with Richard Winslow, Virgil Thomson, Charles Turner and David Del Tredici.

Acknowledgements

A deep gratitude must be expressed to three people: Richard Winslow, my first and most important composition teacher and mentor; Ben Verdery, who knows how to play my music better than I do and who showed me how; and Ralph Jackson, my soulmate for 25 years, who is ever-ready with a listening ear and a word of advice and who puts up with me during the struggle of creation. (DL)

Nel Mezzo: Sonata (1998)

Merion Music/Theodore Presser Co.

1. Urto 6:28
2. Lamento 6:24
3. No! 6:35

Four Pieces (1985-86) 15:09

Frederick Harris Music (Vol. 1. Verdery Guitar Series)

4. Prelude 4:19
5. Episode 3:48
6. Ritual 3:51
7. Dance 2:59

Passacaglia and Toccata (1982) 5:48

Merion Music/Theodore Presser Co.

8. Passacaglia 3:50
9. Toccata 1:55

Freedom Fantasies (1992, rev. 2003) 16:33

Doberman-Yppan Editions

10. "Go Down, Moses" 6:19
11. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" 5:05
12. "Oh, Freedom" 5:01

"Billy Boy" Variations (1983) 3:17

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13. "Billy Boy" Variations

David Leisner plays David Leisner



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