

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH LEO BROUWER

by Rodolfo Betancourt

In the middle of summer, when the heat in Caracas, Venezuela, reaches peak, the Festival Internacional de Agosto prepares itself to receive composer Leo Brouwer for the fourth time. He has been a close collaborator of this Festival since its birth in 1987; he has given Master classes and conducted Venezuelan orchestras with his music and the music of others.

The Festival Internacional de Agosto has been part of the Mavesa Cultural Project which organizes a week dedicated to the guitar, including the Alirio Díaz Competition in classic guitar performance and the Rodrigo Riera Competition in composition. This year the Rodrigo Riera award was won by Don Freund from Indiana University, with the piece *Stirrings*. The Festival encompasses not only music for classic guitar but also music for flamenco guitar, jazz and rock electric guitars, banjo, mandolin, cuatro, cavaquinho, and other instruments related to the guitar. During the same time there is a workshop dedicated to the art of guitar construction; luthiers like Thomas Humphrey and Paul Fischer have visited the Festival. A long list of great musicians performed and taught during these 10 years: Abel Carlevaro, the Assad Duo, Hopkinson Smith, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Ricardo Iznaola, David Russell, Benjamin Verderi, Luis Zea, Rubén Riera, Manolo Sanlúcar, Béla Fleck & The Flecktones, the Ensemble Gurrufío, and many more.

During this intense week of music making, Leo Brouwer demonstrated that his evolution never stops and even more, he has been integrating and synthesizing what he has learned and developed from his experiences in order to continue his creative life with even more thrust. I found him at the hotel working on an orchestration of some music by Wagner. An extremely hard worker, Leo Brouwer does not even rest from the exhausting rehearsal for the final night of the festival. He shared his insights about his evolution as a composer, his appreciation of popular music and the future of the guitar.

RB: Describe for me the development of Leo Brouwer as a composer.

LB: I started composing in 1955. I had very strong contact in this first period with popular [vernacular] culture, a culture with roots in African rituals that have a tradition of almost 500 years in Cuba. It was the pillar for the thematic materials of my music, the source of its Afro-Cuban taste, of course with a sophisticated harmony. This step as a composer has its natural transformation in the 60s. I never have done a radical cut of styles. My evolution has been characterized by fusion, a gradual change forward. In 1962 I began a new period that now could be seen as a middle period in my compositions. The music of this period involves experimental music, so to speak. I don't like to call this kind of music

"experimental", but it is considered with the avant-garde music of this decade. It begins with *Sonogramas* and *Variantes de Percusión* from 1961-62, *Canticum*, *La Espiral Eterna*, etc. Later I composed *Elogio de la Danza*, a piece that looks back as a composition [to Brouwer's Afro-Cuban roots]. I never abandon a compositional element that is beloved and useful as a working tool. This middle period, that encompasses no more than ten years, was a big eruption, a kind of cathartic avant-garde, aleatorealism, etc. I should make clear that I never was influenced by Hans Werner Henze or Luigi Nono. They have been great friends and I owe them that my music, music by a Cuban of twenty-something, got to be known. Motivations? The Cuban Revolution lived a moment of cathartic birth of vanguardism and creative freedom. These European musicians, concerned with cultural and social development, found Leo Brouwer in Cuba and they took his music to Europe. That was a big lucky strike I had thanks to the Revolution.

In time I became saturated with the language of the so called old avant-garde, this contemporary music that everybody has made and that still is being created by many composers. What happened was that the atomized, crisp and "tensional" language of this kind suffered, and still suffers today, a defect related to the essence of compositional balance, a concept that is present in history: Movement, tension, with its consequent rest, relaxation. This "law of opposing forces" - day-night, man-woman, ying-yang, time to love-time to hate - exists within all circumstances of mankind. Palestrina said: if a section is moving the other is not and vice versa; if someone talks, the other listens. The avant-garde lacked the relaxation of all tensions. There is no living entity that doesn't rest. This was one of the things I discovered in my completely self-taught analysis. In this way, I made a kind of regression that moves toward the simplification of the compositional materials. That is what I consider my last period which I call "New Simplicity". This New Simplicity encompasses the essential elements from popular music, from classical music and from the avant-garde itself. They help me to give contrast to big tensions.

RB: There has been a series of changes in your music that starts with Maximalism and goes toward Minimalism. What were the motivations for this evolution?

LB: From my point of view a person needs, with maturity, certain relaxation that is colored by magic and perspective about life. My own perspective, physically as well as intellectually, is sensorial more than analytic, despite the fact that I'm a teacher and an analyst of semantics. The term Minimalism was coined during the 70s with the thesis of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. They have a history of almost 30 years before with the music of Colin McPhee. I took Minimalism as a very important compositional element because it is inherent to my cultural roots from the "third world". Africa, Asia manifest themselves in a minimalist way. These marvelous creators of North American Minimalism discovered that fact, perhaps late.

RB: There has been a historic change regarding the function of music. What insights do you have on this subject?

LB: Today functional music is paralyzed within the commercial realm. The commercial industry owns the function of music. In this sense, there are several ways to appreciate the aural phenomenon: dancing music, popular music with text to listen to, etc. On the other hand we find concert music [formal, cultivated, classical music in a broader sense] which, needing a greater effort, is not commercial. This is the difficult and contradictory situation: concert music, with tremendous background and richness, finds itself underestimated. Hence the public cannot see closely, cannot understand this music with the same confidence it has with popular music. Even Opera, which has had a healthy boom in recent years, doesn't have an easy situation in front of the popular [mass] culture phenomena manipulated by the commercial industry.

In the past the function of music was very clear: the audience met together, understood the themes, the structural details and the interpretation. There wasn't a gap between the cultivated and the popular: Bach and Mozart composed popular music. The guitarist-composers like Tárrega, Mertz, Giuliani were very close to the manifestations of popular music which at that time didn't have divisions. What has happened is that with the brutal development of the 19th century and above all of the 20th century, everything has changed. With the birth of the radio industry and thereafter of television with its immense audiovisual potential - marvelous I would say - the way in which music was appreciated has changed. The public is an accurate receptor, for better or for worse, not only aurally but also visually. I think concert music cannot be the same. Concert music is acting out of time, is aged, old. With the arrival of sophisticated audio systems at low cost, people have the opportunity to listen to music at home. When they have to move to a recital hall there are certain factors that make the concert something unappealing, in part because of the lack of a visual element. With the use of audiovisual devices the public would come closer to cultivated music. That's the reason of the relative success of Opera, which is an audiovisual event in essence. I use audiovisual devices every time I have the opportunity to do so.

RB: The current situation of classical music also involves the world of the classic guitar. Even though there are more and more guitar festivals around the world, guitarists have isolated themselves and became their own audience. Except for contemporary music festivals, the classic guitar has been isolated from the symphonic world.

LB: That has a curious and sad explanation. The symphonic world - theaters, promoters, etc. - is still in the 19th century, where it was born. The symphonic world looks at the guitar as a popular instrument and with an underestimating vision. At the same time, the guitar lacks a history attached to the symphonic world. While Brahms writes two concertos for piano, Chopin another two, Beethoven five, the guitar, with

some exceptions, doesn't offer a solid ground before those colossal instruments like the piano, the violin or the cello. The 19th century belongs fundamentally to those instruments, the 20th century looks after the guitar because, among other reasons, the guitar is present in all the manifestations of popular culture. The symphonic world doesn't acknowledge that fact underestimating the guitar. On the other hand the guitarist, when he doesn't have the education of a symphonic musician, doesn't help either. Hence, when the guitarist plays a concerto by Vivaldi with a symphonic orchestra, he is acting against the instrument. It's unavoidable to repeat the Aranjuez, even though what would be convenient is to broaden this repertoire with solid, strong pieces, which are not abundant. The guitar has at this moment the enormous possibility for being an instrument for recordings because the recorded media can register the colors and the timbre of the guitar. All this is from the stand point of popular culture. Few are the composers like Henze who in his cantata *Novae de Infinito Laudes* for soloist choir and orchestra includes within it a guitar orchestra. This is a very rare example of the search for color and presence.

RB: Your music is full of symbolism. What is the importance of symbolism in your music?

LB: That's difficult to explain. Unlike the homophonic style, the style that Segovia liked most and that induced the creation of works by Torroba, Ponce, Rodrigo and so forth, my way of composing is close to what I call the "Guitar-Harp". The guitar harp is a guitar-orchestra in which all the orchestral compositional elements are closer to the orchestra than to the traditional guitar clichés. I always use the "Guitar-Harp", a resonant guitar. I try to avoid the percussive or melodic guitar. The basic harmonies I use, when they are simple chords, are chords that rest obeying the "law of opposing forces". These harmonies involve small - I could say even miserable- thematic materials. Four foolish notes give me the pretext to compose a work of big dimensions. The melody was the queen of music for a long time, a thing that doesn't happen now. My harmonic language is based in the extensive use of the sound spectrum in the same way as Ravel, Debussy or Charles Koechlin. These composers used to orchestrate departing from a harmonic phenomena: open low pitches, close medium pitches and very close high pitches.

RB: What is your perspective on popular music?

LB: The terms cultivated and popular don't exclude one another. Popular can be Mahler or Brahms or Gismonti or Pat Metheny. The problems that are more difficult to define in this dichotomy are the problems of quality, and we are not going to determine that. It is determined by taste, which is built, manipulated and deformed. History itself will determine those problems. With the birth of massive media, were also born phenomena like that of The Beatles, 35 years ago. This phenomenon is not unique. Nowadays there are several forms of contemporary expression, very important ones, very valid and very discussible. From the apparently vulgar rap to heavy metal, passing

through the decantation of acoustic music from folkloric roots that have been re-explored in Latin America with enormous quality. Another phenomenon that defines the post-modernism of the 80s is fusion. This fusion, still not understood by the specialists, has attracted popular musicians toward classical music. That's the case of Gismonti or Pat Metheny. Pat Metheny composed a passacaglia for orchestra that for me is a master work [The Truth will always be, from the CD *Secret Story*]. It follows the same ascending scheme that some "third world" music has, like Indian ragas, rhythmic talas or other dance forms from Africa and the Americas. This kind of elaboration, without lacking a popular language and even a commercial factor that is unavoidable in this case, has a quality that is constant in this kind of music - Villa-Lobos, Thelonius Monk, Bill Evans. - The search that a creator of music undertakes from what appears banal and manipulated.

RB: Can you tell us about your recent projects for guitar?

LB: I have written a lot for the instrument lately. After the *Concierto Elegíaco* that I wrote for Julian Bream in 1985, I composed the *Concierto de Toronto* around 1990, recorded recently by John Williams in a recording of my complete works. That recording will be released in September of this year [1997]. Thereafter came the *Concierto de Helsinki* and the *Doble Concierto* for guitar and violin. The sixth concerto, the *Concierto de Bolos*, was premiered last July in Greece and also performed at the Festival de Córdoba by Costas Cotsiolis. Now I'm finishing the seventh concerto for guitar. On the way I composed a work, beloved by me and one of the most mature, which has been played a lot lately and that seems to have motivated some great guitarists: [*Hika*] *In Memoriam Takemitsu*. Takemitsu, one of the geniuses of the 20th century, was a great friend whose talent I cannot stop to admire. More recently I composed *El Rito de los Orishas* with a very strong Cuban influence and also the *Sonata* that everybody knows. I have a debt [a new piece] to the greatest duet of the world, the Assad Duo. I also composed my *String Quartet #3*, a *Triple Concerto* for piano, violin, cello and orchestra.

RB: Thanks for your time, Leo. It's been a pleasure to talk with you.

LB: The pleasure is mine...

When I left Leo Brouwer, he was returning to his orchestration of Wagner's music. He closed the Festival conducting the "Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho" Symphony Orchestra with the *Concierto Mudéjar* by the Spanish composer Antón García Abril, Ernesto Bitetti as soloist, and *Concierto Flamenco para un Marinero en Tierra* -sobre Poemas de Rafael Alberti composed and performed by Vicente Amigo; the orchestration of this concerto is by Brouwer.

Starting with the *Decamerón Negro*, the works from Brouwer's third period are often referred to by other authors as his neo-romantic period. This is the same period that he describes with the term "New Simplicity." It is evident that since the *Concierto de Toronto* and the *Sonata* that Brouwer's focus has been on placing the guitar within a broader structural and stylistic framework and in using simpler motivic elements. This is a sign of romantic attitude, in the sense of Beethoven and his contemporaries, toward the ultimate musical goal. However, Brouwer is always moving forward.

Caracas, Summer 1997
© 1997 by Rodolfo Betancourt

Further readings about Leo Brouwer's works and styles

Century, Paul Reed. *Principles of Pitch Organization in Leo Brouwer's Atonal Music for Guitar.* PhD diss. University of California. (Santa Barbara, 1991).

_____. *Leo Brouwer: A Portrait of the Artist in Socialist Cuba.* Latin American Music Review vol.VIII/2, Fall-Winter 1987.

Giro, Radamés. *Leo Brouwer y la Guitarra en Cuba.* (Leo Brouwer and the Guitar in Cuba). Editorial Letras Cubanas (La Habana, Cuba 1986).

McKenna, C. *An Interview with Leo Brouwer.* Guitar Review no.75, Fall 1988 p.10-16.

Pincirolì, Roberto. *Leo Brouwer's works for guitar.* Translated from Italian by Possiedi, Paolo. Guitar Review no.77, Spring 1989 p.4-10; no.78, Summer 1989 p.20-26; no.79, Fall 1989 p.23-31.

Wistuba-Alvarez, Vladimir. *La Música Guitarrística de Leo Brouwer. Una concreción de identidad cultural en el repertorio de la música académica contemporánea* (Leo Brouwer's Guitar Music. Formation of a cultural identity within a repertoire of contemporary academic music). Revista Musical Chilena vol.45 no.175, Jan-June 1991, p.19-41. ISSN 0716-2790.

Note

This interview has been originally published by Guitar Review in the Spring '98 issue (#112). The author would like to thank Ms. Geraldine Rogers for her invaluable help in the translation from Spanish. This article can be quoted in part only if the source is acknowledged and intended for non-commercial use. For a complete text, an express authorization is needed.