ANDREW VIOLETTE
SONATA FOR GUITAR

DAN LIPPEL, GUITAR

I'm grateful, very grateful to Dan Lippel. He choose to stick it out and learn my long guitar piece. I asked a lot of guitarists to play this piece but he is the only one who did it. I consider him a great, great musical mind---and one the great guitarists of his generation.

Why is the piece so long? The piece is long because I'm interested in thematic development. Thematic development takes time. Time I must have to wrench every last inflection from every last motif I put out there. I develop my material the usual classical ways: by counterpoint, texture, harmony and over-all form.

I don't do snappy stuff. There's no extended technique. I don't make my guitarist sing or whistle or cry out---not even optionally.

And my harmony is not dodecaphonic but easy on the ear. You can't pile on a lot of dissonance if you need a lot of time. The ear rebels.

So this sonata is a straight out interweaving of lines. These lines create a counterpoint of roving triadic harmony. Sometimes the harmony is functional (in both the traditional and the tritonal way of my particular modal palette). But just as often the harmony is a necklace of pure triads used as color: dark B minors, shimmering A majors, commanding C majors, complex 9ths and 11ths.

Sometimes the harmonic rhythm is static (like the big colorfield section--25 minutes, one chord). Other times the harmonic rhythm is so fast it's a rainbow-blur of triads.

Let's go through the piece. It's not an analysis but more like a Sunday stroll---pointing out this and that. Here are some things which interest me as a composer--and also things I'm interested in as a performer and fellow listener.

The first thing that flies out from perusal of the score is that it's all written in 2 part counterpoint (sometimes 3 part counterpoint). Why do I bother? Wouldn't it be easier just to have melody and chords? After all, it *is* a guitar; it's not a keyboard. Why not do what the guitar does best?

I wrote contrapuntally because triadic harmony can get pretty boring pretty fast if all the chords are the same. Good counterpoint's a way to counter-act this sameness. With counterpoint every chord gets a different inversion, played on different strings and in different rhythms with different accentuations. It makes for a more interesting, more complex sound. (After all, it's a long piece. I didn't want people to fall asleep or walk out on the guitarist.)

In the first few measures I set up the descending phrase

that will unify the whole piece: E-D-B-Bb-A-(G#). That's a memory from the *Passacaglia* from Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland*. I don't think I would have written my sonata had it not been for Britten's piece. *Nocturnal* was involved in a profound listening experience I had as a teenager:

We were all Juniors from the High School of Music and Art. There was an art student who played guitar. Sometimes he'd invite a bunch of us to go to his house, get high, drink coffee and listen to him play the *Nocturnal*. I remember the visceral thrill of hearing such an intimate instrument and such a great piece played so close and so well. We'd all sit on the floor. I could practically touch the strings!

Years later, I wanted to capture that experience by writing a guitar piece. I hadn't heard the Britten for years and pointedly did not listen to it again before I wrote my sonata. I wanted to keep the memory pure. Before I wrote I dimly recalled a descending theme in the *Passacaglia* from the *Nocturnal* and I used that memory-theme as the basis of my piece. So the whole piece is really an homage to the memory of Benjamin Britten's piece, which is itself an homage to the memory of a piece by John Dowland, which takes me back to Bach and his *Suites.* That's another reason why there's counterpoint. I was also writing an homage to the great Bach *Lute Suites* and the great guitarists who played them.

Above all I wanted melody, always melody. I wanted someone to be able to sing my guitar piece from beginning to end as one big song. I wasn't thinking of a Babbitt melody, with its octave displacements. I thought, "If I can sing it, I'll write it." So singing the melody is a very good way to get into my work.

I'm proud that the *moderato* I wrote, the first part of the sonata, can be sung from first measure to last by a single person---just like a Brahms piece or a Mozart aria. In spite of years of going to new music concerts, years listening to new music CDs, it's the contemporary pieces with melodies---singable melodies---that still grab my attention. Because melody is like a short-cut into the human heart.

About 11 minutes into the piece something strange happens. We get into a big section which I call a *colorfield*. The word *colorfield* is from a type of 40s abstract painting. That type of painting has large fields of flat color. It's the color of the painting that becomes the subject of the painting. In my music that flat color is a single harmony and it's the harmony that becomes the subject. But doesn't it get boring just listening to one harmony for 25 minutes?

Sometimes it does get boring and people fall asleep. But, if

you stick with it, here's what happens: The memory motif we were just singing, well that gets repeated and repeated and repeated---but never in the same way. And the chord that accompanies the memory motive throughout, well that gets repeated and repeated and repeated too--but never in the same way. So what I'm saying is, "Listen to this. This is important."

Because you see this colorfield is like a meditation. It's a thousand variation mantra. It's looking at different facets of a diamond. It's tasting each taste of your morning cappuccino. It's your heart beating--never the same way twice. It's all the breaths you'll ever take in your life time---each one different. It's snowing in NYC now and I'm thinking of all the flakes--each one different.

So the *Colorfield* is all one color, one harmony, except that there's a refrain which buts in every once and a while. The refrain is like the stick the old Zen masters carried around to rouse their sleepy students. But I want to rouse the listener by charm not a stick. So the refrain is a familiar junction that pops up every once in a while.

And then the first part ends because the listener's been doing a lot of work and needs a rest---and so does the guitarist.

That's 33 minutes. The second is another 30 and it's much more varied than the first.

It opens with an Intermezzo, a middle section, because it falls in the middle. It's all melody but the chords are spread out and complex.

This goes straight into a three part fugue. The theme's from the opening but with a fandango twist. Why did I write a fugue? Well, it *is* an homage to a Joaquin Rodrigo fugue but I wrote a fugue basically because I always wanted to write a fugue for guitar and I thought it would be fun. True, the fugue's also an extension of the counterpoint I wrote in the beginning. It does treat the old material in a new way. And it's a nod to the great guitarist/composers who came before me: Carcassi, Sor, Paganini and others. I thought, "If I'm going to write a fugue I'll write it for a hard-to-write-a-fugue-for instrument, like the guitar." And that was the fun of it.

After the fugue I thought I earned the right to re-enact my teenage listening experience directly. I finally got to write my own *Chaconne* after Britten's *Passacaglia*. It made musical sense. The ground bass would be a nice contrast to the rigorous fugal writing. The steady bass line would free up all sorts of sub concise and conscious associations. There's countermelodies, chord passages, all manner of

melisma and baroque affect. There's a little Mozart too and a little Bellini and maybe even a little Arlo Guthrie. I wanted it all to be very like the guitar, very guitaristic. I didn't want it to be playable on any other instrument. Now when I hear Dan Lippel play this section, the *Chaconne*, he really makes the guitar sound and, for me, it sounds so right. Dan goes straight to the heart.

After re-enacting my teenage listening-memory what else could I do but round the piece off in sleep? Sleep is where all good memories go to die. And I knew I had to let go because I had to move on. So I said good-bye to my teenage years, and good-bye to getting high and drinking coffee and listening to Britten's piece, and good-bye to the guitar (because I knew I'd never write another guitar piece) and so I ended my piece in a *Lullaby* and the twinkling of starry harmonics.

- Andrew Violette

Thoughts on Sonata for Guitar by Andrew Violette

The experience and process of learning and working on this piece was unique in a lot of ways, but the thing that stands out for me was the unusual length of the work. Works for solo guitar are rarely longer than twenty-five or thirty minutes, maybe because the concentrated dynamic range of the instrument asks the listener to suspend disbelief for a while and recalibrate their ears so that a guitar *forte* reads as an actual *forte* in dramatic impact. It may be hard to keep that suspension of disbelief going beyond a half an hour, but I think this piece does it successfully because the second movement, *Colorfield,* and the last movement, *Lullaby* make this limitation into an asset; that is, they take the compressed dramatic and dynamic range of the instrument and they make it an extreme focal point, by relying on static textures that emphasize minor internal repetition within arpeggiated passages. These two movements provide a counterbalance to the dense developmental textures of the opening movement, the fugue, and the chaconne, and they engage the listener with a different, more meditative and contemplative relationship to musical time.

The fugue presents some interesting challenges on its own. The inscription *Hommage to Rodrigo* is expressed most clearly in my mind by the characteristic "flamenco" rhythm of the eighth note - triplet sixteenth – two eighth note figure that dominates the fugue subject (I associate this rhythm with a castanet). Meanwhile, the structure, voice leading, and overall way the movement unfolds point strongly to Bach. I found myself working on balancing these strains in the piece, cognizant of the nod to Rodrigo but also wanting to make sure not to obscure the rigor of the contrapuntal

writing. In the end, the Bachian impulse won out I think; I felt that once the ear internalized the character of the subject, it was drawn more to the actual voice leading from moment to moment than to any overarching "Spanish" character. As I got deeper into learning the movement, I really enjoyed working on bringing out the false entrances of the subject or those entrances that subverted the pulse. There are not all that many really well written fugues of this length for the guitar, so it was a lot of fun to tackle a new one.

Overall, it's difficult for me to take a real stab at writing about this piece. On one hand, there are many things about the writing that are really conventional – the harmonic and gestural language is all straight forward, and the writing for guitar is mostly extremely idiomatic, especially for a non-guitarist composer. But there is something extremely subversive about the piece nonetheless that's hard to put my finger on. Maybe the conservative impulse that lies beneath it is the subversion; in a musical climate where many composers feature new timbres, technologies, and extended instrumental techniques as the focal point for new compositions, Andrew has written an hour long guitar sonata that stubbornly relies on counterpoint and melody, time honored and well worn compositional parameters. If, as a performer or a listener, we want to engage with this work, we are forced to do it the old fashioned way, earning its musical rewards through investment in the unfolding of traditional musical rhetoric. As is often the case, I have a much better sense of the piece after finishing the recording and hearing the finished product. It is difficult to say whether this birds-eye view of the work would have enhanced my interpretation (it would have changed it, no doubt); there was something special about enduring a recording session for the *Colorfield* section before I was fully able to see it within the bigger picture of the whole work. I decided to tackle this project despite being somewhat intimidated by its length to see if I could find a sense of balance in such a big piece, recognizing that I might not be able to step back and see the whole thing until I had come out the other side. All said and done, it was well worth the effort and I feel like I've been duly rewarded, it is beautifully proportioned and finds a way to manifest itself convincingly over the course of an hour on an instrument that is not particularly friendly to or familiar with such grand gestures.

- Dan Lippel

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ANDREW VIOLETTE
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Track 1 33:02
I. Moderato
II. Colorfield

Track 2 29:32
I. Intermezzo
II. Fuga a 3 voci: Homage to Joaquin Rodrigo
III. Chaconne after Britten (Andante)
IV. Lullaby

Total Time: 62:34

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