Techniques of Guitar Playing [Review]

By: William M. Nelson

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Abstract:

Hector Berlioz famously commented on the shortcomings of the guitar, among them a “weak sonority” that greatly restricted its use in ensemble (*Berlioz’s Orchestral Treatise: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Hugh Macdonald [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 86). Even though the instrument as Berlioz knew it would give way later in the century to a larger, more sonorous design, the dynamic range of the guitar would never be extended (prior to electrification) in such a way that would satisfy the romantic appetite for vast soundscapes and extreme dynamic contrasts.

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

In *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance*, Tiger C. Roholt has offered us the gift of clear thinking about a phenomenon that can seem either ineffable because solely bodily or obvious to the point of requiring no comment, either ideologically neutral or instead ideologically overdetermined, and that locates many feelings about and desires for music as a cultural practice. We can express gratitude to Roholt for mediating, challenging, and clarifying discourses about groove—from the musicological to the cognitive—that themselves embody values and aspirations from cultures as diverse as the Afrological and Eurological. By experiencing *Groove*, by bodily performing it, we are able to participate in its unique joys, which Roholt explores expertly.

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GUITAR

The Techniques of Guitar Playing. By Seth F. Josel and Ming Tsao. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2014. [233 p. ISBN 9783761822432. €49.95.] CD, music examples, illustrations, tables, appendices, bibliography, index.

Hector Berlioz famously commented on the shortcomings of the guitar, among them a "weak sonority" that greatly restricted its use in ensemble (*Berlioz's Orchestral Treatise: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Hugh Macdonald [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 86). Even though the instrument as Berlioz knew it would give way later in the century to a larger, more sonorous design, the dynamic range of the guitar would never be extended (prior to electrification) in such a way that would satisfy the romantic appetite for vast soundscapes and extreme dynamic contrasts. This limitation relegated the guitar to a peripheral place in the classical tradition of Western music until shifting aesthetic philosophies and compositional techniques provided the instrument a more hospitable environment in the first half of the twentieth century. Several factors contributed to this improvement in the guitar's fortunes. First, the early decades of the century witnessed an increase in the number of touring soloists, among them Andrés Segovia, who rose to a level of international fame unprecedented for a guitarist. His manner of performance exploited the guitar's palette of tonal colors, captivating large audiences and drawing attention to what is arguably the instrument's chief virtue: a great richness of timbral variety that allows for specific musical effects in the absence of a wide range of dynamic contrast. A second factor in the guitar's rise to greater musical prominence was its inclusion in ensembles, primarily for color. Influential in this regard was Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 7 (1904–5), which combines the guitar with other plucked instruments, to striking atmospheric effect. Alban Berg also employed the guitar in the "Bühnenmusik" from his opera *Wozzeck* (1914–22), as did Arnold Schoenberg in the *Serenade*, op. 24 (1920–23), and Anton Webern in *Fünf Stücke*, op. 10 (1911–13), *Drei Lieder*, op. 18 (1925), and *Zwei Lieder*, op. 19 (1925–26). Yet a third factor in the development of the modern guitar and its literature was the stylistic upheaval of the 1950s that shifted compositional focus to the elements of musical texture. The resulting emphasis on the distinctive qualities of sound and on timbre as a significant component in musical composition favored the guitar, and music for the instrument proliferated. This period of guitar history was the first in which most of the music composed for the instrument was by non-guitarists, a phenomenon that transformed the repertoire. John Schneider's landmark publication, *The Contemporary Guitar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), examines this repertoire, surveys its requisite techniques, and urges a musical approach grounded in an awareness of guitar sound in terms of the parameters of timbre. The need for a worthy successor to this volume has long been apparent.

The Techniques of Guitar Playing, by Seth F. Josel and Ming Tsao, addresses this lacuna. It is a reference work for the guitar as used in art music, primarily that of the last three decades, a period that has seen expanded

use of the guitar and a significant extension of its techniques, as well as an increase in the number of small chamber ensembles that include the instrument and the growth of guitar studies as an academic discipline. The nylon-string "classical" guitar figures centrally in the book, though a variety of steel-string guitars and related acoustic instruments are considered in the final chapter. The electric guitar is excluded, the authors explain, as it represents a vast, technologically complex subject that merits a volume of its own. While *The Techniques of Guitar Playing* is neither a systematic method nor a comprehensive history, it draws effectively on key pedagogical and historical documents in service of its evident purposes: to provide a comprehensive guide to the sounds of the contemporary guitar, to present the techniques guitarists might use in generating these sounds, and to supply the notational resources composers might employ in communicating how to perform these sounds. The text includes 261 music examples, 120 illustrations, and five tables, and it comprises four broad chapters—"Guitar Basics," "Guitar Harmonics," "Guitar as Percussion," and " 'All in the Family': The Acoustic Guitar's Relatives." There is an additional fifth chapter of appendices, plus one 66-track compact disc featuring guitar sounds. Each chapter of the book is divided into multiple sections and subsections, a structure that accommodates scanning the text with an eye toward specific techniques. The names or descriptions of techniques form the titles of each numbered section or subsection, so the reader might turn, for example, to subsection 1.3.3 for coverage of "Microtonal tunings" or 3.2.3 for "Unpitched tapping." The large number of these, 45 sections with 99 subsections, attests to the extent and variety of the guitar's sonic possibilities.

Despite being organized by a scheme that facilitates selective attention to individual techniques, the book includes cumulative elements that invite close and complete reading. Most compelling among these is the use of multiple examples from particular compositions in different chapters and sections, a process that fosters understanding of the larger structure of each work by broadening the context in which the reader perceives it. Among the solo works so treated are Luciano Berio's *Sequenza XI* (1988), Brian Ferneyhough's *Kurze Schatten II* (1983–89), and Maurizio Pisati's *Sette Studi* (1990); among the chamber works are Helmut Lachenmann's *Salut für Caudwell* (1977) and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf's *Kurtág-Duo* (2000). Most closely examined, perhaps, are Rolf Riehm's *Toccata Orpheus* (1990), which merits a case study (pp. 142–45) for its extensive use of percussive techniques to create a "unique . . . rarefied sound world" (p. 12), and Tristan Murail's *Tellur* (1977) for solo guitar. This work has its origin in a kind of wager Murail made with himself as he grappled with a question that has long vexed composers of guitar music: Is it possible to generate "a long sound continuum . . . on an instrument that produces brief, plucked sounds" (p. 73)? Murail found his answer in the *rasgueado*, a patterned strumming technique pervasive in flamenco music. He then began experimenting with this texture, diversifying its strummed patterns and developing a system of symbols for the *rasgueado* techniques he extended by combining them with other techniques such as trills or hammer-ons. As the book documents, Murail developed the complex texture of *Tellur* by means of a variety of such combinations. For example, one passage of the work combines the left-hand technique of changing tunings during performance with a continuous right hand *rasgueado* played over the open strings (p. 27). Another passage calls for simultaneous execution of the Bartók pizzicato with the right hand on the open sixth string and a more delicate pizzicato plucked with the left hand on the open second string. Further examples include the combination of left-hand double trills with right hand arpeggios (p. 54) and the gradual transition in the left hand from normal to harmonic pressure while executing a slight glissando as the right hand performs a ritardando tremolo (p. 116). While the book explores *Tellur* in greater detail than is possible here, these passages throw light on the introductory description of Murail's remarkable composition as a work that "generates spectral phenomena specific to the plucked strings of the guitar" (p. 12).

A further unifying element of the book's content is its location of certain technical and notational problems in historical con-

text as a step toward providing solutions for performers and composers of contemporary guitar music. Following a valuable survey of key twentieth-century works for guitar (pp. 84–97), discussion of a harmonic dilemma in the "Ave Regina" from Webern's *Drei Lieder*, op. 18 provides one of the book's finest moments. The quandary here is that Webern failed to indicate where and how the harmonics in this composition are to be performed—and it complicates matters that the guitar offers multiple options for the execution of a single harmonic. This section of the book guides the performer carefully through each available option. One choice is rejected because it "would depart too much from the 12-tone equal temperament that was standard practice for Webern's compositions" (p. 104). Another falls short because it would generate a tonal color at odds with that of the clarinet in this ensemble. But the appropriate choice would generate a delicate sound to blend with the soft dynamic levels of the clarinet at this point in the composition and would thus contribute to a distinctive "vibrating, buzzing texture" that is just right for this music (p. 104). From this problem for performers, the book moves on to detailed coverage of the challenges composers face in the notation of harmonics in contemporary music for the guitar. Provision of a clear and precise system in this regard (p. 116) represents but one example of the extensive and authoritative guidance this book provides composers in approaching the knotty problems that writing for the guitar unfailingly presents. And it should be emphasized in this regard that the book is especially attentive to myriad practical matters, from the introductory description of the physical instrument and its resonant qualities through the mysteries of bi-tone dynamics, tapping notation, and bent-string tuning.

Such insightful, sensitive guidance on the technical, stylistic, and aesthetic dimensions of the contemporary guitar and its music is characteristic of the enlightening, authoritative manner in which *The Techniques of Guitar Playing* surveys a body of music that is no doubt familiar to few but potentially engaging to many. Without question, the combined perspectives of guitarist Seth F. Josel and composer Ming Tsao is informed by superb collaboration not only in their creation and performance of contemporary music for the guitar but also in their commitment to scholarship on its behalf.

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AMERICAN MUSIC

Ralph Kirkpatrick: Letters of the American Harpsichordist and Scholar. By Ralph Kirkpatrick, edited by Meredith Kirkpatrick. (Eastman Studies in Music, vol. 117.) Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014. [xv, 186 p. ISBN 9781580465014. $60.] Photographs, appendices, bibliography, discography, index.

Meredith Kirkpatrick, the niece of the renowned harpsichordist and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick, has compiled and published over one hundred and twenty letters between her uncle and numerous correspondents, including fellow musicians, patrons, instrument builders, teachers, students, and family members. Most of the letters date from between the early 1930s, when Kirkpatrick was traveling extensively in Europe, and the late 1970s, by which time Kirkpatrick had gone completely blind. These letters provide a fascinating glimpse into the personal life of a professional musician—one who, at times, enthused with pleasure about performances or particular works; and at others, demonstrated a testy impatience with builders, teachers, and collaborators. Kirkpatrick's complex relationships make this resource particularly useful for scholars interested in reconstructing the collaborative world of mid-twentieth-century classical music in the United States. While a number of issues in the book's layout, exposition, and organization hinder its ultimate utility, these flaws do not detract from its overall biographical significance.