Part 2

Chapter Six

The Guitar and New Complexity

6.1 Introduction

The guitar is traditionally seen as a non-standard classical instrument. That is, whilst it has a western classical ‘art music’ repertoire, it is not commonly used in the orchestra or conventional chamber ensembles. It does however have a place on the fringes of early 20th century modernism. It is possible that composers found its lack of historical associations and, more recently, its ability to reference popular music, an advantage. Non-guitarists might find a brief account of the guitar, together with an introduction to its use in new music (and not just new complexity compositions) helpful. This brief survey of some of the problems, both general and instrument-specific, encountered in these pieces will give some idea of the decisions performers often need to make when preparing them for performance. It will also provide a useful springboard for the case studies that follow.

6.2 The Guitar; repertoire, personalites and its use by 20th century composers

On a cursory view, the history of the guitar through the 20th century might seem to have been on a totally different trajectory to that of most styles of contemporary composition, including modernism. Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Varèse never wrote for the solo guitar and were seemingly not encouraged to do so by any of the leading performers of the time.
The greatest of these was probably Andrés Segovia, generally seen as single-handedly rescuing the guitar from neglect at the end of the 19th century. Segovia inspired a repertoire and a respectability that would see the guitar firmly established as a concert instrument capable of playing the works of any composer willing to devote time to exploring its idiosyncrasies and compositional intricacies. Segovia, understandably, promoted composers with whose general aesthetic he was sympathetic and rather pointedly ignored those composers who must, even at the time, have been acknowledged as important to the development of 20th century music. It is perhaps ironic that while he recognised the lack of repertoire for the guitar by the great composers of the 18th and 19th centuries, he perpetuated this situation into the 20th. Thus it could be said that Segovia commissioned not new music, but new old music - enriching the guitar’s history, rather than its present. Having said this, there is the possibility that Segovia was unsuccessful in eliciting works from more prominent composers, his own career and reputation still not of sufficient stature to warrant their attention or interest.

Many composers, now described as modernist, did use the guitar in their chamber works. Schoenberg had a part for the guitar in his Serenade (1923-4) (played in its first performance by the guitarist Hans Schlagrad[2]) and his opera Moses und Aron (1930-2). Webern used it in 5 Stücke Op. 10 for voice, E flat clarinet and guitar (1911-1913), Drei Lieder Op. 18 for chamber ensemble (1925), and 2 Lieder Op. 19 for chorus and chamber ensemble (1926). The inference must be that this was not an absurd requirement and that there were guitarists capable of performing to a high level. Pierre Boulez used the guitar in Le Marteau sans Maître (1955), Pli selon pli (1962), Domaines (1969), Éclat (1965) and Éclat/Multiples (1965). The shadowy figures of guitarists Herman Leeb (1906-1979), and Anton Stingl (1908-2000), now rather forgotten, seem to have been prominent at the time. Stingl played the guitar part in the première of Le Marteau sans Maître in 1955 and many subsequent performances.
In the 1950s the guitarist Julian Bream began to commission works from several British composers. Among the first to respond were Benjamin Britten, Peter Racine Fricker, Humphrey Searle, and Malcolm Arnold. Later, Peter Maxwell Davies, Richard Rodney Bennett and Michael Tippett contributed substantial works. As Bream's career developed, composers from other countries, such as Hans Werner Henze, Toru Takemitsu and Leo Brouwer also dedicated pieces to him. Others, such as Tristram Cary and Giles Swayne, wrote pieces for Bream, though he seems not to have performed them widely – if at all. Through the efforts of Bream, a highly regarded body of works has entered the repertoire. Bream has been indefatigable in his promotion of new work and although he has now retired as a professional performer, he has continued his involvement with the promotion of the guitar repertoire by setting up a foundation to continue to commission works by leading composers.

The guitarists Leo Brouwer (1939-) and Seigfried Behrend (1933-1990) were more adventurous in exploring the more modernist repertoire that did exist in the middle of the 20th century. Brouwer recorded works by Mestres Quadreny, Bussotti, and Cardew. Behrend recorded pieces by Isang Yun, Bussotti, Logothetis, Marco and Musgrave. The American guitarist David Starobin (1951-) has commissioned and performed a large number of contemporary works, most notably Elliot Carter's Changes, founding a record label (Bridge Records) to ensure their promotion (amongst many other recording projects unconnected with the guitar).

Since the 1970s the Swedish guitarist Magnus Andersson (1956-) has been extremely prominent in commissioning and performing works from the high modernist repertoire. After his early studies at Trinity College, London with William Grandison, Andersson studied with Behrend in West Germany and then Angelo Gilardino in Vercelli, Italy between 1976 and 1980. Andersson’s first commercial CD recording, Chitarra Con Forza [Andersson 1988], recorded between 1984 and 1988, contained original compositions by Swedish composers written
between 1980 and 1985 and he has subsequently issued several more CDs of solo works and appeared on numerous other recordings playing individual pieces. Composers as diverse as Claudio Ambrosini, Aldo Clementi, James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough, Franco Donatoni, Christopher Fox, Luca Francesconi and Xavier Benguerel, have dedicated pieces to him. He also formed Ensemble Son to perform chamber works including the guitar.

Whilst there are a number of guitarists now playing new repertoire, it is clear that Andersson has made a substantial contribution to the status of the guitar in contemporary music. The younger generation, amongst whom Elena Casoli, Jürgen Ruck, Mats Scheidegger, Seth Josel, Geoffrey Morris, Alan Thomas and Stefan Östersjö should be mentioned, are now playing this repertoire and composers can write with confidence that there will be a guitarist capable of understanding their aesthetics and with a technique commensurate to the challenges it entails.

To summarise; many composers are now drawn to the idea of writing for the guitar, either using it in a chamber ensemble or as a solo instrument (often on the receipt of a commission from a notable performer). Whilst Schoenberg, Webern and the other composers mentioned earlier were attracted by the new sonorities the guitar offered, which enabled both a break from traditional chamber ensemble groupings, and the ability to reference folk influences, contemporary composers are more likely to find the potential to conjure up allusions to pop or rock music more useful. The electric guitar is now an accepted addition to the composer’s repertoire. Other forms of the guitar, such as the eight or ten string guitar, in both diatonic and Yepes tuning, and the acoustic (steel strung) guitar may be called for. Various scordaturas, both standard and non-standard may be employed. The guitarist might even need to be proficient on the banjo and ukulele. The ‘classical’ guitarist looking to gain professional employment would be well advised to be prepared to perform on any of these instruments and have an awareness of amplification, pedals and computer/laptop skills.
6.3 Specific problems for the guitarist in the new complexity repertoire

Before looking in some detail at the three pieces in the case studies it is helpful to look at some examples of the problems the guitarist might face when looking at this repertoire. This will inevitably involve raising many of the issues already discussed in the previous chapters.

Rhythm

Sam Hayden’s \(AXE(S)\) was completed in October 1997 and performed by its dedicatee Mats Scheidegger early in 1998 at the Gaudeamus New Music Week. This is a substantial work in 26 sections of which Scheidegger played 14. The sections are not of equal length, some being only a few bars long, but Scheidegger played about fifteen minutes of the piece estimated (by Hayden) to last about twenty minutes. It is in connection with this piece that Scheidegger wrote to the effect that complex rhythm is relative to tempo. At a slow tempo, rhythms can be played precisely but the faster they are played the more the smallest differences will disappear, each performer needing to find their own way. Several sections of \(AXE(S)\) are in two-part counterpoint with similar rhythmic problems to those described earlier in Chapter Four. The first section (a) for example, starts in 2/8, the upper part being subdivided 9:8 and the lower 13:8 (32nd notes of course). Subsequent bars maintain the 8th note metric (at 8th = 48) whilst subdividing the parts into 17:16 over 10:8, 21:16 over 14:8 and similar (Example 6.1).
Example 6.1 Hayden, AXE(S), bars 1-4

Suffice it to say that no other performances of this work are known to the composer who now regards the original version of the piece as a work in progress, or a proposal for a piece, and is in the process of revising it in collaboration with Scheidegger (Hayden 2008).

Whilst this example is quite sparse compared to other bars in this piece, it is clear the density of information is so great that a totally accurate rhythmic performance is probably quite unrealistic. The performer will be focusing on the numerous other technical requirements that include natural and non-standard harmonics, Bartok pizzicatos, bi-tones, and left hand percussive effects. The poco rit indicates a degree of rhythmic modification and the performer should focus on achieving the diminuendo to the end of the second bar.

Articulation and Dynamics

As one might expect, the pieces tend to exhibit the widest range of articulation and dynamic available to the guitar. In AXE(S) the range from ffff to pppp, and every intermediate variety and changes from one dynamic to another, can occur with breathtaking suddenness. Accents such as sffp and sffz occur regularly along with the more common staccato and staccatissimo. The guitar is not known as an
instrument with a strong forte so all dynamics must be considered relative. The intended effect is usually obvious and realisable to some acceptable degree.

*Microtones*

With one notable exception, the composers mentioned so far have not used microtones to any great extent in their guitar music. The exception is of course Ferneyhough’s *Kurze Schatten II*. This was given in Chapter Two (section 2.4). Regarding the gradual retuning, Ferneyhough writes:

> The most immediate audible result of this process is the progressive abandonment of the peculiar timbre set up by the natural resonance of the guitar corpus responding to a set of non-natural tunings, in favour of the more ample and familiar sonority which a predominantly traditional tuning assures. (Ferneyhough 1995, 140)

He also comments that the problem of the scordatura of the 5th string (tuned almost a tone higher than normal), means that in practice this string tends to drop in pitch over a performance and that with hindsight he might have made a different choice. (Ferneyhough 1995, 140)

As mentioned in Chapter Two (section 2.4), Jonathan Harvey uses fifth-tone retuning (see Chapter Two, footnote 3) for four strings in *Sufi Dance*, written for David Starobin in 1997. The fifth and second strings are tuned forty cents higher and the fourth and first forty cents lower. This compression of the intervals between the fifth and fourth strings and the first and second strings is quite evocative and quite disturbing to ears used to conventional Western equal temperament. Once a particular scordatura is attained the only problem for the guitarist is usually maintaining it, as the strings will tend to return to the pitches they were previously tuned to.
Hayden employs microtones in a ‘natural’ way in AXE(S) where they occur as bi-tones (the string plucked between the fretted note and the nut) and as more remote ‘natural’ harmonics. For example the fifth string touched midway between the second and third fret produces a slightly flat G harmonic when played. The bi-tones are also slightly out of tune. Tables of the possibilities appear in (Mas 1986) and (Schneider 1985).

Most of the composers use the technique of string bending, most often associated with blues and rock guitar music, to alter the pitch of the note.

Ferneyhough has recently composed Renvoi/Shards for quarter-tone guitar and vibraphone.

_Gestural Movements_

For Ferneyhough, gesture:

> belongs to a particular class of objects or states by virtue of all members of that class referring to a particular (well or vaguely defined) semantic domain, a conventionally established signified. (Ferneyhough 1995, 386).

Ferneyhough is of course referring to the musical gesture but the performing artist is likely to have a more pragmatic understanding of the effect of gestures and movements in performance and be acutely aware of the audience’s reaction to them. The gestures the performer makes can easily be seen as part of the drama of the piece. For Schick, speaking of Bone Alphabet:

> the piece became a theatrical arena where physical gesture was not the simple by-product of performance, but an integral part of a growing interpretive point of view. The instrument became a kind of stage for
the enactment of, in Ferneyhough's words, “a theatre of the body” (Schick 1994, 137).

Schick goes on to mention the use of gesture as an ‘indispensable mechanism for memory’ (Schick 1994, 137)

Even an audience of guitar aficionados watching a performance of Kurze Schatten II might be enthralled by the spectacle of the performer executing the martellato passages and the percussive sections but the possibility that this exhibition of the guitarist’s ‘box of tricks’ (Ferneyhough 1995, 370) might similarly seem trite in a hundred years time must be considered seriously. Does this music rely to a large extent on its unusual displays of odd sounds and gestures? Are the musical ideas sufficiently robust to engage the listener beyond the initial novelty of the first few performances?

The use of such techniques as bi-tones in Hayden’s AXE(S) is most definitely musical. The phrases in section (a) for example all start a tempo with a barrage of fff s, sfffz s, and Bartok pizzicatos, but gradually die away to end on a soft bi-tone (see bar 3 in Example 6.1). This can be produced either by the left hand finger plucking behind a fixed finger or the right hand moving to cross the left to play the string. The latter is the more dramatic physical gesture of course. Similarly, Hayden’s use of harmonics produced by stopping the string with the left hand at a particular fret and touching the string at another fret to produce what he calls an artificial harmonic can be a dramatic gesture if the stopping finger is of the right hand – perhaps less so if one of the left hand fingers stretches to reach it. This is an extension of the conventional technique of artificial harmonics by guitarists, where the string is touched at the octave to the fingered left hand note with the index finger of the right hand and played with another finger of the right hand. Hayden has stated that some of these harmonics might be better played as natural harmonics and his revision of the score will probably reflect this, though most of them are possible and not inherently unplayable (Hayden 2008).
Another interesting technique borrowed from the electric guitar can be found in Berio’s *Sequenza X11* for guitar where he uses both hands to do a complex trill figure.

*Playability*

This is an enormous topic and can only be considered briefly here. Playable by whom is the obvious first point as it is obvious that different performers have different abilities. A performer may change a fingering to make the passage more playable and more importantly may alter the music in some way in an attempt to clarify the composer’s intentions. This might be done with or without the composer’s knowledge or consent.

With new compositions there is the probable collaboration with a guitarist that inevitably, and rightly, leaves its mark on the ‘final’ version of the piece. However, different instrumentalists will almost certainly come to different conclusions regarding the practicability or otherwise of aspects of the composer’s initial version.

Two examples must suffice to illustrate the problems encountered in this area. *Kurze Schatten II* was written as an elaborate set of studies on specific issues. In the first movement the problem is of working on three polyphonic levels. As mentioned earlier the upper two voices are entirely in natural harmonics, the pitches of which reflect the scordatura. Ferneyhough writes:

> One of the main challenges to the performer is to avoid damping freely resonating sounds when playing complex and often, in themselves, technically highly demanding figures across one or more other strings. (Ferneyhough 1995, 141)
Ferneyhough is quite clear as to the effect he requires and due to the thoroughness with which he has studied the instrument it all seems feasible until the notes actually have to be played. For example, in bar 10 (Example 6.2) there should be a resonating C sharp harmonic played on the fifth string in the previous bar, sustaining over a flurry of chords and figures for which the composer has been careful to avoid using this fifth string.

**Example 6.2** Ferneyhough, *Kurze Schatten II*, 1st movement, bars 9-10

Manifestly this will never work in practice let alone at the dynamic called for and against the other notes in the lower part. Added to this specificity is the ambiguity in the fingering of some of the notes. Ferneyhough specifies the fingering for the first four notes or chords and then leaves it ambiguous as to where the next E natural should be played. This could be the first or the second string and because of the scordatura the result will be different. This problem is actually present throughout the piece. Two guitarists who have played it have reported that, when asked about these ambiguities Ferneyhough has left it to the performer to decide\(^{10}\), and he admits to this with regard to the sixth movement (Ferneyhough 1995, 150). Here then is an issue of playability in the sense that Ferneyhough has written a
score that is, in part, ambiguous and to the extent it is unambiguous, bar 10 at least is unrealisable.

Hayden’s *AXE(S)* shows a similar level of care when asking for certain effects. In fact every bar of this piece evinces the fact that Hayden has thought through every action the guitarist must take to achieve the notated result. The problem is the density of special effects required in quick succession. We might say that movements by the performer are *related* if they occur as part of a standard element of technique. Examples might be the notes of an arpeggio or scale, the individual notes of a rasgueado or tremolo. These may be played at an extremely high speed. Movements might be called *unrelated* if they comprise individual gestures that need preparation away from the usual playing position. The bi-tones and artificial harmonics used by Hayden certainly fall into this category. With practice, the combination of unrelated gestures may be played fairly quickly but there comes a point when the demands are unrealistic and pruning may enable other aspects of the piece to emerge. An example might be bar 21 (Example 6.3).

**Example 6.3** Hayden, *AXE(S)*, bars 20-22

8\(^{th}\) = 48

The performer is asked to make twenty successive unrelated actions, consisting of a mixture of bi-tones, artificial and natural harmonics and staccatissimo notes and conventional chords in the space of two 8\(^{th}\) notes, or 2.5 seconds. Two of these
actions are acciaccaturas. Omitting the first acciaccatura (the bi-tone) makes the flow more manageable. (The indication of the second string for the first bi-tone in the bar is a mistake and should be the fourth string.) Scheidegger has written that he did not and would not make any changes to this section (Scheidegger 2008), so this is an example where different players will draw different conclusions about playability.

6.4 Aesthetics and performance practice

The degree to which performers inform themselves of the composer’s aesthetic concerns will vary. At one extreme, it is possible to take a quite literal interpretation of Ferneyhough’s view, quoted at the beginning of Chapter Four, that ‘notation is always relative to intention, whereby it is up to the composer to adequately suggest appropriate forms of response.’ The performer might then feel justified in only looking to the score to divine the composer’s intentions. At the other extreme, some might prefer to immerse themselves more deeply in the composer’s aesthetic preoccupations and whatever performance practice there is. The majority of performers probably lie somewhere between these two positions.

As has been mentioned several times before, the new complexity repertoire cannot, at this time, be said to have a performance practice. The performer will not find many recorded performances of any one piece and many have not been played very much, if at all. There is now a growing number of academic papers that can be consulted by those performers curious to know how musicologists view the works but commentary by performers is sparse, often amounting to little more than what appears on a performance note or the insert of a CD. The following case studies will point to those resources that are most useful for the particular pieces being studied here.
6.5 My own preparation for performance – introduction to the case studies

I will give some idea of my own preparation for each piece in its case study. It must be borne in mind that I learnt these pieces subsequent to starting my research, that is, relatively recently. They are therefore still in the early stages of preparation in the sense described by Schick, Redgate etc. and it is quite probable my own interpretations will be similarly refined on successive relearnings and reconsideration over the years. Another point to bear in mind is that I cannot estimate the influence the few other recordings of these pieces had on my own performance. I had to listen to them in order to comment on the performances but on subsequent listening it seems to me their influence was not excessive and that my own solutions to the problems were often rather different to those of the other performers.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Steve Goss for this last insight.


5. The diatonic tuning is, from 10th string to 1st: A₁ B₁ C D E A d g b e¹ and the Yepes tuning is: G flat A flat B flat C E A d g b e¹ (at true pitch but remembering guitar music is written one octave higher than it sounds).

6. Hayden's original score and the revised, shorter version are now available from Composers Edition. The revised version has been produced by musical software, possibly Sibelius.

7. This is of course an assertion that needs some supporting evidence if it is to be taken as advice for others.

8. See Scheidegger (Scheidegger 2008).

9. An example of this is can be found in (Östersjö 2008) where Östersjö revisits the editions of Nørgård's guitar pieces, coming to the conclusion that the original scores are better than those edited by Møldrup, the original editor and often dedicatee.

10. Thomas (Thomas 2009) and Scheidegger (Scheidegger 2008).