

The New York Times

Music Review

All Guitar, and a Little Comic Relief in Unexpected Places

By ALLAN KOZINN

Published: April 24, 2011

The Cuban composer Leo Brouwer has written prolifically for orchestra and chamber ensembles as well as for film. (His most famous work, to American filmgoers, is the score for “Like Water for Chocolate.”) But he is also an accomplished guitarist, and he has contributed a huge number of inspired works to his instrument’s repertory. By the mid-1970s several of his pieces — “Elogio de la Danza” (1964), “Canticum” (1968) and “La Espiral Eterna” (1971) — were part of the canon, and he has continued to write generously for colleagues.



Karsten Moran for The New York Times
A Tribute to Leo Brouwer
Benjamin Verdery, one of the guitarists performing in the 92nd Street Y's program on Saturday evening.

[Benjamin Verdery](#), the director of the 92nd Street Y’s Art of the Guitar series, rounded up five soloists and two ensembles for an overview of Mr. Brouwer’s guitar music on Saturday evening. He reserved the most famous piece for himself, offering a fluid, free-spirited account of the swirling, rich-textured “Espiral Eterna,” in which the score’s hypnotic, rippling arpeggiations were less arresting than the (usually subsidiary) muted, percussive passages.

Other performances were more straightforward, but no less illuminating. The Canadian Guitar Quartet opened the program with the gentle “Paisaje Cubano con Lluvia” (1984), an involved tone painting, alternately idyllic and rumbling, that captures the imagery of the title, “Cuban Countryside With Rain.” Later in the program the quartet gave an insistent, hard-driven performance of “Cambío el Ritmo de la Noche” (1984).

Certain elements turn up regularly in Mr. Brouwer’s work. He is a master of using arpeggiation, not only as accompaniment but as a source of melody and as picturesque effect. Grand finger slides, aggressive string snapping and a variety of percussive effects are also signature moves. Yet each piece seems to have a different spirit or accent. “Hika” (1996), a soft-spoken memorial to Toru Takemitsu, played gracefully by Raphaella Smits on an eight-string guitar, embraces elements of Takemitsu’s gentle, impressionistic style.

Much of “Per Suonare à Due” (1973) is a study in comic aggressiveness, which the Eden Stell Guitar Duo played to the max, each player occasionally leaving his seat to harass the other, musically, with rapid-fire notes meant to disrupt solos.

Folk influences are plentiful too. René Izquierdo mined them in his account of “Elogio de la Danza,” which contrasted strikingly with his performance of the more overtly avant-garde “Canticum.” Popular currents also enlivened Christopher Stell’s bright rendering of “Ojos Brujos” (1970) and were mixed with modernist touches in the three movements of “El Decamerón Negro” (1981), heard in a shapely reading by Ricardo Cobo.

Odair Assad closed the program with an eloquent performance of the Sonata del Caminante (2007). The influences of Brazilian music were more evident in the context of this Brouwer program than they were when Mr. Assad played the work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in February.