

Interview with Eos Guitar Quartet

**How do you begin with the Quartet?**

We met during the early eighties when we were all studying at the conservatory in Zürich. There weren't many idols back then. Some inspiration we got from Los Romeros and the then newly founded Los Angeles Guitar Quartet.

**From your latest album "20 +" there is a relationship of very important names of which a majority is related to the world of jazz (Camilo, Stern, Gismonti, Frith...). Has it been personal taste for jazz and big personality's choice?**

Yes, of course! We all love Jazz, Flamenco and World Music. And we've met and got to know many of those musicians personally, during the course of these years. It felt natural to ask them for commissioning a composition.

**There is a composer, Fred Frith, whose piece has seemed simple but very attractive, with prepared guitars, minimalism.... Can you speak about the work and the composer? Have you played more works with prepared guitar? What tools did you work with? What indications in the score?**

In "Fair", Frith colourfully accentuates a mellow Icelandic dawn. For that, David uses a Chinese chopstick, Marcel a drum stick, Martin works the guitar with the cello bow and Michael struggles with constantly changing artificial flageolets. You can actually hear the bone-chilling cold in this piece. Information about Frith can be found under

<http://www.fredfrith.com/>

By the way: Leo Brouwer has issued an order for bottlenecks in his piece <Acerca del cielo: La ciudad de las mil cuerdas>; that's all concerning the subject Prepared Guitars.

**If you could choose a composer you didn't work with, for commissioning a work. Who would be?**

There are some great musicians and composers on our wish list, such as John Scofield or Pat Metheny, whom we got to know recently. If his time permits, he might compose a longer piece for guitar quartet.

**You have recorded music of George Gruntz. I have found interesting and very original music with an attractive atmospheres and very careful timbres. Can you speak about it? Does he have more works for guitar? It was commissioned for him or was already composed the work?**

George Gruntz is a famous swiss jazz composer and a great leader of a bigband. When we contacted him to compose a work for guitar quartet he never wrote until that moment for the guitar. In order to know the possibilities of our instrument he bought himself a cheap guitar. So he was able to control whether for example an accord technically can be played or not.

**If so, how was the relationship with him? Does he master the language? Does he requested suggestions or allow you to make changes?**

We had a very good relationship and we have of course the same native language. After having received the composition we had to arrange certain things in order to make it playable, always of course with his permission. But generally we can say that the piece is composed so well that we had to change only little things.

**The interesting guitar quartet that Gruntz wrote for you have the title “no Xod! To Rap (Paradoxon)” What is this?**

This composition bases upon a remarkable text by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, a famous swiss author, which was performed on the occasion of an award which received the former president of the Czech republic Vaclav Havel. The speech had the title «Switzerland a paradoxon». If you read paradoxon from the back it will be «no xod a rap». That is it, very simple.

**You have made arrangements of Boccherini, Vivaldi, Stravinsky, Rossini... How is the process of arrangement? What can we expect of an orquestal arrangement for guitar quartet? Are you looking for a new point of view for an old work or simply the possibility of enjoying non-original music for guitar?**

The arrangement is always the work of one of us. The piece which is going to be arranged must be choose very carefully. Not every composition is suited for guitar quartet. The music must be prickling and must have certain easiness, heavy melancholic romantic music does not suit very well. To play the overture by Rossini for example is a very joyful experience and sometimes a composition becomes in our reduced version even more understandable.

**What was your toughest work arrangement and why?**

Every arrangement of a piece which is originally written for symphonic orchestra is a very tough work and needs a lot of thinking. First of all you have got to know what the essential of a part is, which voice is absolutely necessary and which can be neglected. Then you have to do the instrumentation, to arrange all the voices in order to create a great variety. Each guitar has to play solos as well as accompaniments and has to use all colors you can play on the guitar in order to reproduce the quality of sound of an orchestra.

**Forgive my ignorance and not having the score but how a work like "Acerca del cielo: La ciudad de las mil cuerdas" of Leo Brouwer can be worked? Is there precision in the writing or there are indications to improvise?**

There is no precision in the score. The rhythm is written down in space notation and the pitches are definite, like in the early Works of Brouwer (Parabola, Per suonare a due...) and influential composers like Henze, Penderecki, Ligeti and others.

**Do you have any composer whose music you had played that, in your view, it stands out for his talent to write music for guitars?**

Most of our composers are guitar players with profound experiences in the instrument. Our favorites are Fred Frith, Ralph Towner and Vinz Vonlanthen who all are very inventive.

**How is worked the subject of guitar ensembles at the conservatories in Switzerland? Is there a serious work?**

No, there is not.

In Basel and Berne they prefer to unite the guitar with others instruments, chamber music in mixed combinations. In Zurich however the students are playing more in guitar groups.

**How do you planning rehearsals?**

Our structure is strictly democratic and each player can put in his quality. Nobody plays the first guitar in all pieces. We have one till three rehearsals weekly depending on the necessity.

**How do you organize a new work?**

Most of all new works are commissioned. In our concerts we play a mixture of new commissioned works and older transcriptions from the classical and baroque era.

**What key factors are important to evaluate the quality of a group of guitars? What do you value most in a group?**

One of the most important things in a guitar ensemble is dynamic balance. We work a lot on this topic. We try to approximate the sound of an orchestra. Then of course precise interaction and accurate intonation are essential.

**Can you tell us about interesting half level material, pedagogically and musically points of view?**

Jürg Kindle, a Swiss guitarist/composer wrote quite a few very interesting pieces on different levels. Kalimba would fit in this category.

**Interesting initial level repertoire, from a musical and didactic point of view.**

Trans Europa Express by Jürg Kindle. And he has more; his pieces are surely worth a try.

**The best advice to make a group.**

It's difficult to give advices on this matter. We can only tell you about our beginning: As we said before, we met during our studies at Music Academy Zürich. After a few changes the actual line-up crystallized. Over the years we observed that the fact of having studied with the same teacher (Walter Feybli) gave us a collective musical basis, a mutual understanding. That doesn't mean that we don't fight a lot over interpretation. There is still room for discussion.

**What is the best advice you can give for maintaining a group?**

We don't know if this is imperative for a group, but we are very lucky insofar as we understand each other not only musically. We like to spend time together away from the guitar, talk about family matters, movies, literature etc. And also each member has enough room to pursue other musical projects of his own from which the quartet profits a lot. But like in a marriage, in order to last, you have to put work into the relationship. That means you should talk about problems when they arise and try to solve them together. We fight quite a bit from time to time, but this glues us together even more. Let's hope it remains this way.

**Why form a group of guitars? Which are the benefits for the student and the musician?**

There's nothing better than playing in an ensemble. You learn everything. Playing actively and passively, listening and guiding, focussing on yourself or on the entire group, to have one's own way as well as backing down. Believe us, playing in a quartet is a school for life!

By Fernando Bartolomé Zoffo for Modern Guitar Ensemble  
<http://modernguitarensemble.blogspot.com/p/english-stuff.html>