



Guitar quartet thrives on the unexpected

Anna Reguero • Staff Writer • February 11, 2009

In the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet's early years (three record companies ago, to be exact), it once agreed to a zany recording for Disney in which it played the Electrical Street Parade theme in the style of Vivaldi.

"It was a good arrangement and it sounded fine, but boy, our hearts were not in it," says William Kanengiser, a founding member of the quartet and a faculty member at the University of Southern California. They haven't played it since.

Mickey Mouse projects aside, it takes Kanengiser a moment to think about styles that might not work for the LAGQ, a classically minded ensemble with global and pop influences. He finally comes up with an answer: gypsy music.

Then he reconsiders. "Maybe it could really work," he says as if it were a light-bulb moment, though he thinks about adding a gypsy violinist or accordionist to the mix for authenticity.

It's the never-say-never attitude that got the LAGQ where it is, turning a niche ensemble into a popular sensation. Four guitars, as it turns out when Kanengiser, John Dearman, Scott Tennant and Matthew Greif play together, can sound like almost anything.

"We all have a strong sense of groove and popular music and world music styles," says Kanengiser. Besides classical music, LAGQ has recorded jazz, rock, folk, Latin, African, Klezmer and most recently, Brazilian music. "That's the thing about our group that got us on the map: crossover into other styles."

The group won the Best Classical Crossover Grammy in 2005 for *Guitar Heroes*, an album of covers — Frank Zappa, Jimi Hendrix, Pat Metheny, Django Reinhart, John McLaughlin, Chet Atkins and more.

"I think the (classical) guitar is becoming very much in the mainstream more and more," says Nicholas Goluses, professor of guitar at the Eastman School of Music. "A lot of it has to do with ensembles like the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. They are huge, and they are huge for a good reason. They really connect with audiences."

Frank Salomon Associates

(212)581-5197*info@franksalomon.com*www.franksalomon.com

The LAGQ's performance with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra this weekend might then be considered crossover times four. It performs the East Coast premiere of a new concerto by Sergio Assad, one of the most celebrated guitarists of today. Titled *Interchange*, it will feature four distinct world styles that converge in the work's final movement.

The first movement was written with Kanengiser in mind; Assad considers him the "most classical member of the quartet" in his notes on the piece. But it's anything but classical. The movement features Middle Eastern, Sephardic sounds.

"In a way, the thing he wrote me is the most overtly ethnic of all the four cadenzas, really," says Kanengiser. He thinks his classical façade may be a result of his Mozart performance in the movie *Crossroads*, his Hollywood debut.

Flamenco tones dominate the second movement, written for Tennant's strengths in rapid strumming in the dance's odd time signatures. The newest member of the group, Greif, showcases his jazz improvisation skills in the third movement. Part of Greif's cadenza, which Kanengiser calls a West Coast jazz with Pacific Rim overtones, will be free for the performer to create on the spot.

The fourth movement puts the spotlight on Dearman and his seven-string guitar in a Brazilian-influenced cadenza.

And like the *Interchange* in Los Angeles, a point in the congested city where four freeways intersect, layered on top of each other, all four themes meet in the final movement.

"The idea was that we were all on our individual musical highway and in the end it all comes together, weaving and intermingling together," says Kanengiser.

Goluses, who is hosting a national guitar festival at Eastman this week in conjunction with the LAGQ performances, says that there's a real buzz going on about the new concerto. Until this point, there was only one concerto for guitar quartet and orchestra, the *Concerto Andaluz* by Rodrigo — a well-loved and well-worn piece by the LAGQ.

"Certainly, the guitar world is ready for another," he says. "If it's like his other music, it will be expressive, tonal, romantic and utterly rhythmic."

Interchange was performed for the first time last weekend in San Antonio, Texas.

Audiences get the infrequent chance to also hear the LAGQ up close. On Sunday, the group performs a recital as part of the Kilbourn Concert Series at Eastman, which will include selections from its latest CD, *LAGQ: Brazil*.

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