

CLASSICAL: Los Angeles Guitar Quartet

Now for something completely different...

By Brenda Tremblay on February 11, 2009



The LAGQ performs the East Coast premiere of composer Sergio Assad's "Interchange for Guitar Quartet and Orchestra" this weekend with the RPO; the piece was written specifically for the four members of the group. PHOTO PROVIDED

Arguably the hottest classical ensemble in the world, the Grammy-winning Los Angeles Guitar Quartet gives the East Coast premiere of "Interchange for Guitar Quartet and Orchestra" by Sergio Assad this week with Christopher Seaman and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. City interviewed guitarist and founding member Bill Kanengiser. An edited transcript follows.

CITY: Coming from LA, how do you feel about snow and cold?

Bill Kanengiser: Even though we've been Angelinos for years, we all hail from colder climes. I was born in New Jersey, Scott [Tennant] in Detroit, John [Dearman] in Minneapolis, and Matt [Greif] in Oklahoma. So we've had our share of cold weather, but probably nothing compared to Rochester!

What do you like about introducing new music?

There's a mixture of excitement and fear that comes with playing a piece for the first time. This piece is especially dear to us, because it was written by one of our best friends, who also happens to be one of the finest guitar composers on the planet. And he wrote each of the first four movements as specific tributes to each of us as individuals, so it's a very personal piece for us.

Frank Salomon Associates

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

What does "interchange" refer to?

There's a double meaning to the title. The first connotation refers to the way that each of our themes, set in styles as varied as Middle-Eastern, Spanish, jazz, and Brazilian, come together and interweave, and how we four interact with the orchestra. But the other meaning is a reference to a famous freeway overpass in downtown Los Angeles, near Disney Hall, called the "Four-Level Interchange". It's as if we each are on our own musical highway, which meet and intermingle. The double-connotations of music and driving reach into the titles of the individual movements: Sephardic Passage, Gypsy Slopes, Pacific Overlook, Forroblues Detour, and Crossings.

What does it sound like?

There's a wonderful eclectic spirit to the piece, as it traverses such a wide range of world-music styles, all set within a symphonic frame. Sergio uses a variety of special orchestral colors, with lots of percussion, harp, and exquisite wind writing, and the way he balances the sound of the four guitars with the rest of the group is masterful.

How does it capture the spirit of your group?

Sergio has been close friends with us for over 20 years, and he knows our playing as a group and as individuals intimately. He wrote mini-cadenzas for each of us in the movements dedicated to us, capturing an aspect of our musical taste and personality. My movement has a distinct Jewish character, Scott's is based on flamenco, Matt's uses jazz influences, and John's centers on Brazilian styles. And when we play together, especially in the final group cadenza, all of these styles come together in a unified whole.

The guitar is a relatively simple instrument. How do you produce different colors and textures when you play?

There are many ways to alter the sound of the plucked string, depending on the angle you pluck, how much nail interacts with the string, whether you strum or not, and where you place your hand relative to the bridge. One of the hallmarks of our group has become a heightened awareness of the color possibilities with the guitar, to make it a varied listening experience for the audience.

I read that Monty Python star John Cleese is a big LAGQ fan. Are you working with him?

We're very excited about an upcoming project, set to be premiered in late March. I've developed a stage presentation based on Don Quixote for John to narrate with our musical accompaniment. I created a one-hour script, where he plays a variety of characters from the classic book, and we will play music from the Spanish renaissance, music which could have been heard by Cervantes himself. It's been a real labor of love, taking literally thousands of hours of study and work. We are absolutely thrilled to have the chance to share the stage with one of our all-time heroes, as we're all hopeless Monty Python fans. And we hope that the audiences come away with a real appreciation for the humor, pathos, and surreal modernism of this 17th century masterpiece.

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