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“Once we establish our bona fides with a chamber music audience, then we can hit them with Frank Zappa and Jimi Hendrix.”

**– BILL KANENGISER
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On the Cover
Guitar Tech

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LAGO (L to R): Matthew Greif, John Dearman,
Bill Kanengiser, Scott Tennant

RADIANT SOUNDS & COLORS

For four decades, the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet has inspired legions of guitarists, composers, and fans across the globe

BY MARK SMALL

The Los Angeles Guitar Quartet (LAGQ) is as renowned for its virtuosity as for its adventurous musical programming. They are not your typical classical ensemble. The quartet's individual members' musical tastes cover a vast spectrum. While classical music (from the Renaissance to the present era) is the anchor genre, the group's influences add jazz, flamenco, folk, bluegrass, rock, and world music to the mix.

Each member has burnished educational credentials and holds teaching posts at notable California universities, yet they don't herald intellectualism in the modern music they play. Nor do they strive for commercial appeal when incorporating popular music elements. The group is about sincere, joyful music-making done with exacting precision while projecting warmth and enthusiasm. The LAGQ also has a sense of humor, as evidenced in the cheeky "Pachelbel's 'Loose' Canon," from their 1996 Baroque album *For Thy Pleasure*. It opens with a straight-faced statement of the beloved theme before taking it through hilarious and irreverent disco, rock, rumba, big-band, and other stylistic variations.

NOW AND THEN

The group recently marked four decades of performing and recording together. To date, they have received three Grammy nominations and won the award for their 2005 album, *Guitar Heroes*. The ensemble formed at the University of Southern California, where original members Bill Kanengiser, John Dearman, Scott Tennant, and Anisa Angarola were all students of Pepe Romero of the famed Romero family guitar quartet. (Dearman had previously studied with Celín Romero, Pepe's brother.) At USC, Dearman recalls, "I met Bill, and we began playing duos. When Scott came the next year [1980], Pepe suggested we form a quartet with Anisa." "We assembled to play in Pepe's masterclasses," Tennant adds, "and were thrilled to perform his arrangements of great Spanish pieces."

They went by the generic moniker USC Guitar Quartet before becoming the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet in 1982. "That was the year we became a professional group," Kanengiser remembers. "We did our first tour in Mexico and got a manager. We released our first album the next year." In 1990, Angarola

decided to pursue a different direction and formed her own quartet. “Anisa is a great musician and guitarist,” Dearman offers. “We were doing a lot of what the Romeros did—playing Spanish and other classical music. Bill and I had a different musical introduction to the guitar with electric guitars and steel-strings, and started exploring things closer to our roots. Our musical direction changed.” Fellow USC alumnus Andrew York—who also had a diverse musical background—joined the group upon Angarola’s departure.

“When Andy joined, we decided to be our own group, not just a second-best version of someone else,” Tennant states. “He started writing, and for the years he was in the group, we played a new piece by him every season.” York’s gift for composing and arranging enhanced the ensemble’s unique identity.

After 16 years and the Grammy win (for Best Crossover Classical Album), York left to launch his own successful solo performing and composing career. In 2006, Matthew Greif, a former student of Tennant and Kanengiser at USC, took York’s place. “It wasn’t an upheaval because Matt’s playing could cover the things Andy did,” Dearman says. “His jazz playing is excellent, he’s a great reader, and a really good arranger.” Greif made his recorded debut on the 2007 album *LAGQ Brazil* and appears on the group’s *Interchange* and *New Renaissance* CDs, plus *LAGQ’s Ingenious Gentleman: Don Quixote* DVD. The current lineup is also featured on Pat Metheny’s 2021 *Road to the Sun* album [see story in the July/August 2021 issue of *AG*] playing the five-movement title work commissioned by LAGQ.

SYNTHESIS OF SOUND AND LIGHT

April 2022 saw the release of *Opalescent*, the 16th album in the LAGQ catalog. The title reflects the album’s dedication to the late Australian guitarist and composer Phillip Houghton. Described by his friends as a synesthete, Houghton perceived colors in musical notes and timbres. “Phillip’s *Opals* was the starting point for this recording,” says Kanengiser. “We met Phillip years ago in Sydney, and fell in love with this piece. After he passed, we thought it important to honor his memory on the recording. His two pieces [*Opals* and “Wave Radiance”] are the most overtly related to sound and light. We feel that all the music on this record in some way plays on this synthesis of sound and light.”

The movements of Houghton’s tripartite *Opals* were inspired by different varieties of the gemstone. “Black Opal” features subdued but insistent rhythmic figures ricocheting between the players as the piece roams through minor-mode territory to a place with glowing, multi-

Early LAGQ: standing (L to R) Tennant and Kanengiser; seated Andrew York and Dearman.



BLAKE LITTLE

While classical music is the anchor genre, the group’s influences add jazz, flamenco, folk, bluegrass, rock, and world music into the mix.

hued harmonies. The moody “Water Opal” is grounded in D minor and driven by various percussive taps and knocks, interspersed with bursts of color in concerted lines harmonized with notes outside the key. Harmonics appear throughout like droplets of water that taper off at the end of a rain shower. “White Opal” is upbeat, powered largely by a midrange pedal tone, arpeggio accompaniment figures that break into melodic fragments, and chord clusters. It concludes on a triumphant A major triad.

Aside from *Opals*, the album contains two other major offerings—German guitarist-composer Tilman Hopstock’s *Suite Transcendent*

and Robert Beaser’s *Chaconne*—in addition to five shorter works. The Beaser piece comprises nine variations on a repeating passacaglia bass figure loosely based on the descending line in Henry Purcell’s “Thy Hand Belinda,” an aria from the English Renaissance composer’s only opera.

“It’s a pretty big and ambitious work by a non-guitarist,” says Dearman, who votes it his favorite piece on the album. “It’s not what our quartet is usually identified with, which is music that’s pretty approachable. I always find something different in playing this piece. You can dig really deeply and keep finding new things.”

Kanengiser adds, “There are some neo-Baroque variations—one having French-overture aspects with its dotted notes. Some are jumpy, almost pop-sounding variations. Some are expanded in a minimalist style. The last two have a world music feel. The final one is like a Cuban dance. Beaser throws in so many styles.”

As for *Suite Transcendent*, Kanengiser explains that Hopstock, who has composed in the Impressionist style under the non de plume Allan Wilcocks, “wrote a series of preludes, etudes, and other works that were amazing. They seemed like pieces Debussy could have written for solo guitar. I asked him if ‘Allan’ could write a guitar quartet, and we got this

LOS ANGELES GUITAR QUARTET

five-movement piece inspired by an imaginary exhibition of Impressionist paintings.”

“We recorded it in 2017 for Tilman’s label,” Tennant adds, “and remastered it for this project. There are very coloristic tones in his musical directions in the score. It’s very impressionistic music.” (On the album the piece is credited to Hoppstock, not Wilcocks.)

The first movement, “Open Landscape,” is airy, with scampering whole-tone passages and pianistic figures orchestrated across the quartet. The brief “La Grande Cathedrale” is notable for its dark and dramatic chords and harmonics that arc upwards before plateauing for a hushed finish. Fittingly, “A Breath of Wind” has a lively tempo, breezy feel, and whole-tone motives. Its latter part gives nods toward Ravel’s “Empress of the Pagoda.” Kanengiser feels “La Porte du Ciel,” the fourth movement, is one of the most alluring: “It’s written almost entirely in harmonics and requires a strange tuning to produce them. It doesn’t sound like four guitars. To me, it almost sounds like a xylophone.” “Danza Diabolica” starts with vigorous antiphonal strumming and rapid-fire cross-string trills. Rich, strummed chords appear before a fugal passage rises up from the low end. Then, a series of arpeggiated chords

recalling Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” lead to an emphatic concluding bass-note punctuation.

Frederic Hand’s “Chorale” began life as a piece for guitar orchestra before Hand reworked it for the quartet. Hand has written that it “is inspired by the Renaissance and Baroque choral music that I listened to in my youth (especially Bach’s chorales). Although I’ve integrated some of my favorite jazz harmonies and rhythms into the fabric of the music.” The opening theme has a reverent, vocal quality and unfolds with pleasing harmonic shifts. As the piece evolves, it becomes decidedly guitaristic via pizzicato effects and arpeggiated accompaniments, before a serene ending.

In “Alki Point,” composer Kevin Callahan creates an intricate texture with overlaid arpeggio patterns and melodies tossed between the players. A creative interpolation of aspects of jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery’s tune “Four on Six” appears about two minutes in, highlighting an appreciation for jazz by both composer and performers.

Matthew Greif has long been intrigued by Michael Hedges’ watershed acoustic guitar piece “Aerial Boundaries,” and arranged it for the group. “I always thought it would be a great concert opener for the quartet,” Greif says. “The

energy, crispness, and innovation in it are stunning.” While Hedges played melodic fragments, bass notes, chordal accompaniment, sweeps of harmonics, and percussive tapping on a single guitar, it becomes expansive on four. Greif divvied up the original parts and added a new section. “The guys thought it was good to cover what Michael played, but felt I should add something to give us more of a reason to play it,” Greif notes. He used Hedges’ material and wrote a contrapuntal episode that precedes the recap of the theme. Bookending the album are Andrew York’s sprightly “Hidden Realm of Light” and Houghton’s luminous “Wave Radiance.” The York piece, recorded previously on LAGQ’s 2006 album *Spin*, gets a replay as the opener on *Opalescent*.

“Wave Radiance” is almost like a bonus track,” Kanengiser says. “*Suite Transcendent* ends with a bang and then ‘Wave Radiance’ carries you out on a beam of light. It’s a meditation on subtly morphing waves of light beams. I don’t think we’ve recorded a piece like that.”

LASTING LEGACY

On June 27, 2021, the Guitar Foundation of America celebrated the four decades of LAGQ, presenting them with the Artistic Achievement Award and inducting them into the GFA Hall of Fame. Pepe Romero presented the award in a ceremony that also acknowledged past LAGQ members Angarola and York, who were on hand. In the June 2021 issue of *Soundboard*, the journal of the GFA, Romero shared reminiscences about the group’s evolution, writing: “In short time, LAGQ developed their own musical direction and style and became an enormous success, playing concerts, making recordings, inspiring composers to write for them, which provided a huge contribution to the guitar quartet literature.” Additionally, LAGQ has helped to popularize the guitar quartet internationally and inspired numerous other groups to form.

Judging by the stylistic diversity of their repertoire, some may think the LAGQ has left the traditional canon behind. But classical music is well represented in their discography alongside other types of music. The group’s live show paints the full picture. “We’ve always taken a balanced approach to our recitals,” says Kanengiser. “We open with the overture to Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, and end the concert with music by Manuel de Falla. We also play an arrangement I made of the first movement of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata.’ It’s become sort of a hit for us. Once we establish our bona fides with a chamber music audience, then we can hit them with Frank Zappa and Jimi Hendrix.”

AC



JIRO SCHNEIDER

WHAT THEY PLAY

On *Opalescent*, John Dearman plays a 2018 Dennis Tolz spruce seven-string with D’Addario XT hard tension strings, Bill Kanengiser plays a 2016 Gernot Wagner spruce with Savarez Cantiga Blue, Scott Tennant plays a 2010 Philip Woodfield spruce with Savarez Cantiga Creation Red, and Matthew Greif plays a 2015 Antonius Müller cedar with Savarez Cantiga Red. —MS