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Edited by
MICHAEL LORIMER

Michael Lorimer ♫ New York

ATANAS OURKOUZOUNOV

Starlight—5 Nocturnes

4 Greek Miniatures

In the last twenty years, the Balkan peninsula has given rise to superb guitarists and wonderful new guitar music. Those who love our instrument and have long drawn from the wells of Spain, Italy and Latin America are now discovering a new source in the cultural crossroads bounded by the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The present series aims to bring to light compositions of the Bulgarian guitarist and composer Atanas Ourkouzounov. He is a musical leader from Southeastern Europe whose work has been described by Tim Panting of Classical Guitar magazine as contemporary music that “feels as part of the world as nature itself: earthy and unearthly but above all of the human spirit.”

Notes on the scores in this volume and a biography of Atanas Ourkouzounov follow.

Starlight—5 Nocturnes

Starlight—5 Nocturnes is a five-movement suite evoking the universe of which our solar system is but one tiny part. The first movement Infant Stars is a delicate web of musical lines created by slurs, bell-like harmonics, and notes ringing on separate strings. Chords and a slow-moving musical line portray vast, towering clouds of stars in Nebule. Next, the brilliant coloristic effect of harmonics created by the left hand alone captures the astral phenomenon Light Echoes. Slurred notes alternate with plucked notes in the whirling moto perpetuo of Spiral Galaxies which accelerates without break into the last movement Death of a Star, a finale in prestissimo tempo which depicts the instability and colossal explosion of energy that occur when a star becomes extinct.

In addition to the contrasts in tempos, textures and techniques that distinguish one movement from another, each nocturne features a different tuning of the guitar’s sixth string—this produces a warp in tonality at the end of each of the first four nocturnes when the pitch of the sixth string is lowered and the guitar’s center of gravity relocates.

The composer dedicates each of the first four nocturnes to a champion of his music—Daniel McKay (Australian guitarist), Michael Lorimer (American guitarist and publisher of the Nocturnes), Peter Strömgren (Danish guitarist and organizer of the guitar festival in Aarhus), and Dimitar Doitchinov (Bulgarian guitarist and teacher of the composer). The finale pays homage to Benjamin, the composer’s student and friend who died at 25 of cancer.

Composition of Starlight—5 Nocturnes began in Paris, France in the spring of 2005 and was completed in Paris and in Tadotsu, Japan in 2007 and 2008. The German guitarist Agustin Wiedemann premiered an early version of the Nocturnes on November 20, 2005 in Linares, Spain at the Festival Andrés Segovia.

The astral phenomena Starlight—5 Nocturnes evokes may be seen in spectacular Hubble telescope photographs on page 4 and at http://hubblesite.org.

4 Greek Miniatures

The 4 Greek Miniatures were written for the Greek guitarist Antigoni Goni to fulfill her commission for a small suite based on Greek folk dances. The traditional themes harmonized and developed in the first two Miniatures—Pleading Love Song and Joyous Love Song—were supplied by Antigoni Goni. This music was special to Ms. Goni because as a child her very first experiences of performing onstage were dancing those very dances as a member of a children’s group.

In the Pleading Love Song, one lover begs the other, “Don’t leave me. Let’s talk. Let’s work things out. I can’t live without you.”

By contrast, the singer of the Joyous Love Song declares, “Sunday, I first saw her. Monday and Tuesday, I fell in love with her. Wednesday, I kissed her; Thursday, I asked for her hand; Friday, I adorned her with a gold necklace; and on Saturday, I danced with her in marriage.”

The composer complements his settings of these two traditional songs from the Greek islands with music he created in Greek style invoking the mainland. Lament is a poignant and orchestral dialogue of natural tones and bell-like harmonics. It is in typical Macedonian rhythm (3+2+2). Leaping Dance evokes athletic Greek dance that originated in rugged mountainous areas. With a colorful and virtuosic interplay of slurs played by the left hand, harmonics played by the right hand, string slaps, and percussive thumps, the guitarist portrays the lead dancer’s dazzling leaps, turns, and fancy maneuvers.

Over the summer of 2008, Atanas Ourkouzounov wrote and premiered the 4 Greek Miniatures in Paris, France and Tadotsu, Japan. Antigoni Goni has not yet recorded the 4 Greek Miniatures but in 2007 she and flautist Laura Gilbert recorded another Ourkouzounov piece, the Sonatina for flute and guitar which appears on their CD Songs and Dances from the New Village (Koch International Classics—7652).
Atanas Ourkouzounov

Atanas Ourkouzounov (b. 1970 in Burgas, Bulgaria), a leading figure in Bulgaria’s contemporary music, is winning international fame both as a guitarist and as a composer. His music features the asymmetric rhythms and modal harmonies typical of his homeland but, like Béla Bartók, Ourkouzounov (pronounced Oor-koo-ZOO-nov) uses regional traditions as a point of departure from which he ranges widely in an intuitive and personal way. Whereas Bartók’s muse was the piano, Ourkouzounov’s muse is—fortunately for guitarists—the guitar.

Ourkouzounov has written over 50 works for guitar—solos, duos, trios, quartets, instrumental ensembles, and two concerti—a number of which have won important prizes, and a majority of which have been published by leading publishers.

Atanas Ourkouzounov performs widely as soloist, with his wife the Japanese flautist Mie Ogura, and with the Ourkouzounov Ensemble (two guitars, flute and cello).

In addition to two CDs on which Ourkouzounov plays, more than 25 CDs of his music performed by others are currently available. Complete lists of Ourkouzounov’s compositions, publishers, awards and CDs can be found at www.ourkouzounov.com

Ourkouzounov is also in demand as a teacher and juror at conferences and conservatories in Europe and Japan and he holds a full-time position at the Conservatoire “Maurice Ravel” in Paris.

Atanas Ourkouzounov grew up in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he began guitar studies with Dimitar Doitchinov. Starting in 1992, he continued his studies in France with Arnaud Dumond, Alexandre Lagoya and Olivier Chassain. He studied guitar, chamber music, analysis, ethnomusicology and improvisation at the Paris Conservatory and graduated in 1997 winning by unanimous vote the First Prize in guitar.

Six years before he went to Paris, he started to compose. He was 16 years old and had been playing guitar only one year. For fun, he began changing details in pieces he was learning and then he wrote his first piece—3 Inventions—using the baroque idiom and subject of a fugue he was studying. He became intoxicated with composing and soon started using melodies, rhythms, and modal harmonies of Bulgarian folk music. At the same time, he was avidly listening to recordings, especially Arthur Honegger’s Symphonie N°5 and Igor Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring and Petrushka. To this day, Igor Stravinsky, György Ligeti, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Claude Debussy are among Ourkouzounov’s favorite composers.

While at least a trace of Bulgaria is always present in Ourkouzounov’s music, in the last eight years he has also written pieces he calls “dedications” in which he composes his own music from the point of view of other composers and/or idioms—for example, Caprice d’après Paganini (which imagines a “new” Paganini as he might exist today); Fantaisie d’après Kapsberger (which draws on elements of 17th-century music for archlute); and Toryanse Tales (which uses a Japanese folk theme).

Ourkouzounov is also fascinated by timbre and idiomatic coloristic effects—as explored for example in Light Echoes (see page 7 in the present volume), in the Reflet guitar duos, and above all in music he is now composing for guitar, harp, and string quartet. Ourkouzounov feels the “timbre” works are more contemporary and abstract—and perhaps more personal—than his pieces in which Bulgarian elements prevail.

Ourkouzounov enjoys performing flute-guitar duos with his wife. Typical programs are two Ourkouzounov works alongside arrangements and original music by diverse composers—for example, pieces by Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Béla Bartók, and Claude Debussy—as well as arrangements Ourkouzounov calls “postcards” (folk music from countries such as Mali, Japan, Bulgaria, Brazil, and India).

As a listener, Ourkouzounov loves performers such as the conductor Carlos Kleiber, the pianists Grigory Sokolov and Keith Jarrett, and many jazz or folk-jazz musicians—for example, the Bulgarian clarinetist Ivo Papazov, the Bulgarian flautist Theodosii Spassov and the group Shakti (especially the guitarist John McLaughlin and the tabla player Zakir Hussain).

Michael Lorimer, New York 2009