

Composers Series
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Collected Works, Volume 2

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ATANAS OURKOUZOUNOV

Caprice on an Orthodox Chant

Visions Chromatiques N°1

11 Prelude-Etudes

In the last twenty years, the Balkan peninsula has given rise to superb guitarists and exciting 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 South-eastern 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.”

The present volume features two concert solos and a set of eleven *preludes-études* Atanas Ourkouzounov composed in the years 2006–2010. Each piece is intended to be performed in concert either by itself or in combination with other Ourkouzounov pieces.

Notes on the scores in this volume follow. A biography of Atanas Ourkouzounov appears on page 36.

Caprice on an Orthodox Chant

Caprice on an Orthodox Chant is a five-minute guitar solo Atanas Ourkouzounov wrote in 2006 and 2010 in response to a request from the Dutch guitarist Jan Bartlema to write a piece inspired by religion.

For the composer, “religion” evoked childhood memories of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria—the smell of candles, the sound of men’s voices singing in the distance, and a “strange feeling of mystery.”

Modal harmonies, Balkan rhythms, and guitaristic textures typical of other Ourkouzounov compositions open the *Caprice*. Then—halfway through the piece (ms. 134–158)—a slow-moving chant appears in the bass accompanied by a filigree in the upper voices. After about 30 seconds, the chant gives way to material from the piece’s beginning which gradually builds to a climax of strummed chords. A coda then emerges in which the “strange feeling of mystery” is evoked by chime-like harmonics heard over an ethereal ostinato of left-hand slurs and string slaps.

The chant is one the composer heard sung from the traditional liturgy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church by the men’s choir called “Yulangelo”. This ensemble may be heard online at <http://yulangelo.com>

Visions Chromatiques N°1

Visions Chromatiques N°1 is a seven-and-one-half minute guitar solo—fruit of the year 2009 in which Atanas Ourkouzounov sought to write more freely and abstractly in rhythm, harmony, meter, and form. The new language was more chromatic, modes were mixed, rhythms were more pliant and less repetitive, and bar lines were sometimes absent.

Visions Chromatiques N°1 is one continuous movement divided into three parts, each of which displays different aspects of the same material—a transmutation the composer likens to experiencing water in its states of liquid, ice, and steam. The first minute-and-one-half features a chromatic line that divides into different voices—sometimes one, sometimes two, sometimes three diverging and converging strands—as it meanders through different registers (ms. 1–30). For the next three-and-one-half minutes the tempo is livelier, the line is more modal and less chromatic, and the rhythms are more periodic and less elastic (ms. 31–197). Although the meter is a constant seven—typical for Balkan music in general and Ourkouzounov’s music in particular—the composer renders a softer and more abstract effect by phrasing across bar lines and by frequently putting five notes into four beats and four notes into three beats. This makes the line sing free and bar lines disappear. In the final two-and-one-half-minutes (page 9), the tempo slows way down, the periodic rhythms disappear, and the material seems to divide into two parts: an evanescent, evaporating, chromatic line—fragmented like the pitches of a distant wind chime—and a descending modal motive that appears to comment *sotto voce* on the ongoing disintegration.

Transitions between the three sections of the *Visions Chromatiques N°1* are intentionally smooth so that the feeling is of one unbroken seven-and-one-half minutes without interruptions or gear changes.

In 2009, Ourkouzounov also composed *Visions Chromatiques N°2* for voice, violin, mandola, and guitar. This counterpart to the guitar solo is in the same musical idiom and may be heard at www.ourkouzounov.com

11 Prelude–Etudes

Each of Ourkouzounov's *11 Prelude–Etudes* is both a *prelude* (exciting new repertoire for concert performance) and an *etude* (a focused and challenging-but-not-too-difficult aid to advancing one's technique). Two musical idioms are manifest—one in which modal harmonies and asymmetric meters attest to the composer's Balkan heritage; and another in which chromaticism, elastic rhythms, and freedom from the bar line point to his fascination with timbre, idiomatic resources of the guitar, and music not tied to one geographic region or cultural heritage. Each *prelude–etude* explores different issues, as follows:

1. *Opening Tune* is a flowing and spirited back-and-forth of modal harmonies and melodic fragments romping through various registers, tuning the listener's ears and the guitarist's hands on the way. It begins with two quick, simple arpeggios—the first is of four notes, the next of three, making a total of seven notes. Then come a three-note ascending scale and a three-note descending scale—the two threes making one six. For the rest of this *prelude–etude*, the alternation of seven and six continues as does the zesty dialogue between arpeggiated chords and melodic fragments.

2. *Moving Fourths* is an animated piece in the form of an arch—a pair of voices in parallel fourths dialoguing in bars of seven with a bass line. The player's left hand must continuously execute chord changes smoothly; while the right hand has to coordinate exchanges between thumb and fingers and keep the bass line independent from the fourths.

3. *Resonance* is about the guitar's sonority. As a chromatic line winds through different registers, it crosses strings, manifests a wide spectrum of colors, and forms chords and clusters. In contrast to the two preceding *prelude-etudes*, the rhythms of *Resonance* are more elastic and less periodic—attention is less on bar lines, more on phrasing and rubato, and above all on projecting the myriad sonorities of the line.

4. *Stretches* is a complement and a contrast to *Resonance*. Also, in relief to all the pieces preceding, rhythmic activity is essentially static. Focus is on the vertical rather than the horizontal, on harmony rather than line—specifically, harmonies spelled out one note at a time to create spaces of varied sizes and colors. Here, each chord is like a small world. The player must take care to sound each note of each harmony.

5. *Jagged Rhythms* is a vivacious dance of major and minor seventh harmonies in which accents fire irregularly against a constant rhythm of 3+2+3. For the player, focus is on the left hand in general, double slurs in particular.

6. *Ostinato* is a lively piece featuring a constantly

recurring melodic fragment in the bass over which we hear counter melodies and harmonies. Although the meter is a constant seven, unusual and asymmetric accents in the upper voices create the sense of hearing several different rhythmical layers at once.

7. *Modes* is like Balkan be-bop jazz. Its agitated and mercurial flavor derives from frequent changes of modes, constant changes of groupings—6s, 5s, 7s and 9s—and irregularly placed rests and breaks. The churning solo line which kicks off the piece is later contrasted to and accompanied by sustained material—bell-like chimes, broken chords with high treble notes, and slow-moving or stationary basses.

8. *Chromaticism N°1* is a high-spirited dialogue of two chromatic voices. Melody predominates rather than harmony, and rhythm centers on free-flowing phrases rather than bar lines. Highlighted are control of rubato, realization of crescendos and decrescendos, and execution of left hand slurs and slides.

9. *Chromaticism N°2*, like the preceding *prelude-etude*, concerns chromaticism. But here the focus at first is on chords and clusters, the vertical rather than the horizontal, harmony and resonance rather than melody or counterpoint. For 30 seconds, arpeggios in asymmetrical rhythms pose a swirling challenge to the right hand. Then, as two lines emerge to converse in cascades of descending chromatic scales, we have an *etude* for the left hand in articulating descending slurs.

10. *Glissandi* is a modal piece in two voices with a playful, joking character. Its focus is the *glissando*—the technique of sounding one note using both hands and then creating subsequent pitches by sliding the left hand on the fretboard. In this *prelude-etude*, special care must be taken to play the slides in time, within the piece's rhythmic contours.

11. *Dream Bells* is about interpretation—projecting the feeling behind the notes—even more than it is about its featured resource, the natural harmonic. Its bell-like sonorities and *scordatura*—a nonstandard tuning of the guitar—give this endpiece a unique sound, almost as if it were being played on a different guitar than the preceding ten *prelude–etudes*. Also unusual is its mood: whereas many sets end on an energetic and emphatic note, here the closing is contemplative and wistful.

The *11 Prelude–Etudes* may be played as the complete set, in smaller groups, as solos, or in combinations with other music by Atanas Ourkouzounov.

Starting in October 2008 and finishing in March 2010, Ourkouzounov wrote the *11 Prelude–Etudes* in Paris, France and Sofia, Bulgaria. He premiered all eleven in Paris on June 13, 2010 in the theater "Le Lucernaire" on the series "Voyages en guitare".

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 60 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 three CDs on which Ourkouzounov plays, more than 30 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* from *Starlight*—5 *Nocturnes*, in the

Reflet guitar duos, and above all in the *Visions Chromatiques N°1* for guitar solo and the *Visions Chromatiques N°2* for voice, violin, mandola, and guitar. 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).

