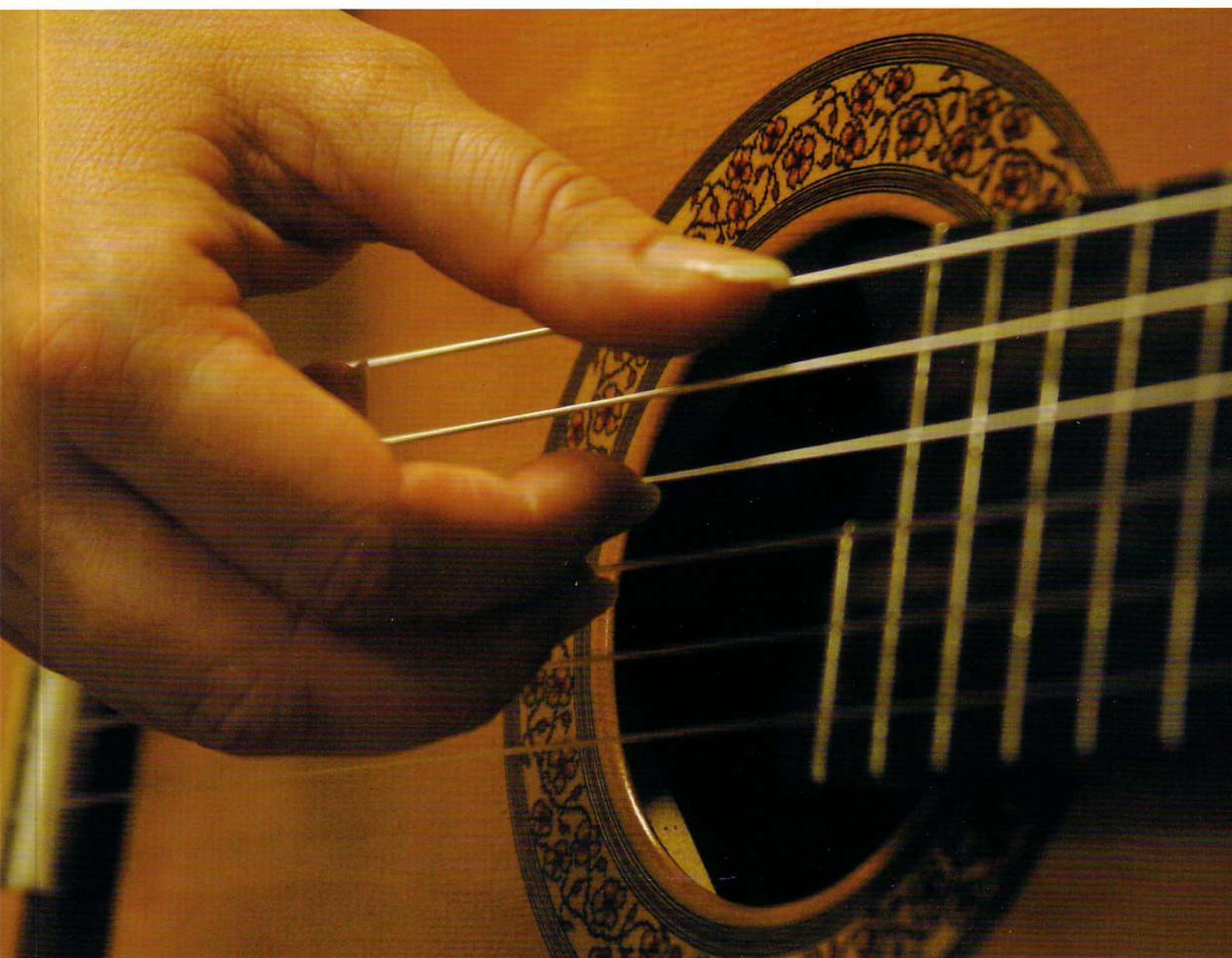


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# SOUNDBOARD

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Technique

# Technique in Ensemble

## “Who’s Drinking, and Who’s Paying?” – Conversations about Duo Technique with Some of Today’s Leading Ensembles.

by Tracy Anne Smith

I remember hearing Julian Gray describe his impression when he first heard Ron Pearl (a wonderful player and composer who became his duo partner) perform in rep class: “That’s who I want to play with.” The same conviction struck me, when I heard my duo partner Rob MacDonald in the mid-1990s. In fact, as a student, I rather timidly approached him to ask if he would play duo with me. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said, (in that concerned-sounding voice that usually means, “No.”) “Playing in duo is like getting married.” About ten years later, I visited Toronto, and inspired by a SoloDuo concert at which we were seated together, Rob succumbed to the telepathic message I silently sent him throughout the first half of the concert: “Ask me to play duo with you.” Intermission came and he said, “It’s too bad you don’t live here—we could play duo.” Elated, I immediately replied, “Hey, I don’t have to live here!” ChromaDuo had begun.

Great duos share more than just an affinity for each other’s playing; at some point in their lives, the players have often studied with mutual teachers, have developed a common approach to technique, and have reached a similar view on musical values. In the following conversations, players from some of my favorite duos shared their approach to blending their individual concepts of technique and musicianship into the voice of their ensemble.

### Choosing the right partner

When Rob and I formed ChromaDuo, we joined an ever-growing list of long-distance duos. The increasing prevalence of these types of ensembles speaks to the fact that playing with the right person is worth the travel time, hassle, and the resulting intense rehearsal schedule when finally together. Whether near or far from your partner, the commonalities that form the foundation of your initial inspiration to partnership must be nurtured through rehearsal. Sérgio Assad, who plays in duo with his brother Odair, commented on this requirement.

“My brother Odair and I had the advantage of growing up together and being able to share the same kind of education with the same teachers, methods and so on,” says Sérgio, though he cautions: “Though growing up together is a good starting point, it is not enough—and it doesn’t mean you can skip the long hours of practicing.”



Above: Tracy Anne Smith with partner, Rob MacDonald, of ChromaDuo.

### Before the rehearsal—fingering parts together

Of course, a commitment to learning one’s part well is crucial; however, one must know not only his or her own part but also be familiar with the other’s, and both must have an idea of what the piece will sound like as a whole. Says Meng Su of the Beijing Duo: “Whenever we learn a new piece, the first step is to learn our own part well. Articulations are what we find really important in terms of ensemble, so that we decide [together] in the first stage.” As articulation can be difficult to change after a piece gets into the fingers, it’s essential to communicate with your partner on how you hear the musical material, and to make provisional decisions on how you are going to articulate themes, recurrent motives and their accompaniments, and any kind of material that is traded back and forth between parts, before beginning work on your part.

As such, left-hand fingering strategies must be decided during this first phase, or, in some more extreme cases, one member of the ensemble may finger both parts. For example, at a very busy time during my doctorate, my teacher Manuel Barrueco suggested that my partner do the fingering on both our parts. Since my partner’s approach would be consistent throughout the piece, and as fingering conveys both tone control and articulation, more time would be saved than just the time each would spend putting in provisional fingerings.



Above: Odair Assad, left, and Sérgio Assad, right, the Assad Brothers.

Meticulously practicing a part that sounds fine on its own and then finding it clashes completely with the other partner's decisions at the first rehearsal is an obvious waste of time and effort. Think *campanella* fingering versus single strings, or open position versus up the neck. "Notes that belong to the same musical texture should be played in the same string areas," says Sérgio Assad.

Right-hand techniques also need to be discussed and agreed upon to achieve coherence. Sérgio Assad calls this "tone accuracy."

"Some people play using rest strokes, others use free strokes; some play closer to the bridge and others closer to the sound hole. This variety of sounds is quite welcome in a broader picture of guitar ensemble; however, depending on the context of a piece, the same kind of articulation should be applied. A sound produced with a rest stroke has more body than the one with a free stroke, and in the case of notes that need the same weight when plucked together by two players, these notes should be played using the same technique."

#### Preparing your score

Maintaining the same score from rehearsal to performance is most efficient, so advance work to make a score performance ready as soon as possible can be advantageous. Says Thomas Kirchhoff of the Amadeus Guitar Duo: "As we play from music, we have to prepare the music so that we don't have page turns, so we usually cut the voices and put them on cardboard that is a little larger than letter-size." In ChromaDuo, we made the leap from paper scores to an electronic score—an iPad and AirTurn as both music stand and foot pedal to turn pages virtually, and a program called ForScore to display and mark up the music (though one can also scan a paper score). The benefit of the electronic score is that it is both elegant and small, and therefore unobtrusive; no page turns, and no huge barrier between the audience and the duo. Still other duos memorize their parts; the Beijing Duo recommends visualization to help memorize duo music, just as one would do for a solo concert.

When working with particularly rhythmically complex music, writing your partner's rhythm above your own part (as simple stems) can clarify the interplay between parts, and make rehearsals and



Above: Dale Kavanagh, left, and Thomas Kirchhoff, right, of Amadeus Guitar Duo.

performances easier and more productive. Marking entrances and solo sections is valuable. Deciding which notes act as musical pillars and need to be absolutely together, and which passages are more free and ornamental, can also help guide your individual practice and rehearsal together.

#### The rehearsal schedule

It's important to rehearse as much as possible. Though daily is best, it's not always possible unless the members share a familial or marital bond. The Beijing Guitar Duo, celebrated not least for their technical prowess, conducts three-hour rehearsals twice a week. Les Frères Méduses, another long distance duo made up of the mutually brilliant Randall Avers and Benoît Albert, make up for their inability to meet in person in a revolutionary way, through technology. Says Avers:

"As we live in different countries, we use drum machines as means of honing our musical ideas when we can't rehearse face-to-face. Our repertoire consists of folk music from around the world, so



Above: Benoît Albert, left, and Randall Avers, right, of Les Frères Méduses.

## Conversations About Duo Technique ... (continued)

the virtual drummer seems to be a natural extension of the music we choose to play. From an interpretive angle, drum files give immediate clarification to the score's structure and serve as a tremendously precise discussion template. It has stretched our ideas and forced us to evolve in our technique, interpretation and ensemble playing."

As such, Les Frères uses the program DoggieBox to create practice files around their entire duo repertoire. After making an initial map of each score, both members make adjustments to the file until they have a precisely detailed and collaborative interpretive plan. As Avers states, "Many musical questions are resolved in the process: tempo, *rubato*, *accelerandi*, articulations. We become quickly familiar with the macro structure." Particularly useful is the ability to create a quantified *rubato* through manipulating rhythm very precisely. Thus, the program becomes a kind of an ultra-malleable and musical metronome, and interpretive tool. They don't need to have a rehearsal schedule as such, as long as each partner can spend time with the files and with the guitar.

### In rehearsal

As in personal daily practice, it can be beneficial to start with focused technical work: "As a guitar duo is a very particular ensemble which often requires a very compact sound as one instrument, we recommend integrating in daily practice some very simple exercises for the right hand, to be played together by the duo, which focus completely on sound projection," says Susana Prieto of Duo Melis. This can progress to playing scales together, with the aim of perfectly matching sound. Sitting in the same configuration and proximity as you will in concert during every rehearsal provides you with opportunities to practice cuing, and to get used to the angles at which you can best see your partner's hands for synchronizing.

Meng Su comments: "During rehearsal, we discuss and experiment with the musical ideas. The interpretation constantly changes



Above: Susana Prieto, left, and Alexis Muzurakis, right, of Duo Melis.

as time goes on, sometimes just refining, sometimes becoming totally different. We listen to each other's breathing to make sure we are really together. Most of the time we just go with the flow, and if musically we are thinking the same, the notes will go together."

Ensembles can glean when their partner will play based on keenly observing his breath, the subtle motions of his right hand as it initiates a movement, or the left as it completes a shift. These subtle cues are less obvious than nodding or meeting eyes, and also are often more reliable. Of course, cuing and synchronizing can also be done through directed expressive body movement.

Really *hearing* what you and your partner are doing is one of the most difficult (and humbling!) challenges that duo partners face. As in solo practice, it can be tempting to get lost in the beauty of what one is doing in one's mind, and not realize until one is onstage and listening hyper-critically that the duo is not exactly together. One has to almost fool the brain by taking away the excess sound. Says Duo Melis: "Whenever there is a virtuosic passage with rhythmical complications, we like to isolate the passage and practice it while damping the sound of the strings with a cloth. This makes it easier to listen just to the attack and thereby figure out which notes are not exactly together."

However, ensemble is not the only thing to listen for: "One great technique that Michael and I use is to record our rehearsals," says Drew Henderson of the Henderson-Kolk Duo. "We don't use anything fancy—sometimes just an iPhone will do. When we can devote all of our attention to simply listening, we always catch something we'd like to change. Whether it's a balance issue or unclear articulation, the recording medium will always reveal something that needs improvement, and sometimes it's an element that is completely unexpected."

Les Frères Méduses also employs technology to analyze their ensemble playing: "Often we perform with close-miking, either for the purpose of amplifying or live recording, so we are pushing ourselves to be precise."

Listening for balance is crucial as well. "Get rid of the soloist habits," says Sérgio Assad. "A soloist is used to controlling aspects of the sound on his own. When playing for the first time with a partner, players normally carry the same attitude towards their own playing



Above: Meng Su, left, and Yameng Wang, right, of Beijing Guitar Duo.



Above: Michael Kolk, left, and Drew Henderson, right, of Henderson-Kolk Duo.

and simply don't listen to their partners." He suggests a third person in order to double check the balance between players. Sérgio Assad also shared his thoughts on developing *rubato* in duo playing.

"The most challenging thing is using the *rubato* technique. It's quite common to see some new duo partners playing quite stiffly. The flexibility with tempo requires a complete understanding of your partner and requires years and years of practicing together. A good way of rehearsing this is that one of the players takes the lead and applies his own personal *rubato* to a particular section, the other player must try to follow as closely as possible. When you consider that you have achieved a good result, invert the process. In this way you give equal opportunities to each individual approach to *rubato*, and after a while you might find a common ground."

Duo Melis echoes this idea: "For us, the most important thing when performing onstage as a duo is to express the musical ideas as strongly and as clearly as possible. To arrive at this point, it is really important to respect each other's musical ideas, and manage to be flexible enough to adjust to different ways of phrasing."

Clearly, one person's *rubato* can't completely dominate the rehearsal; one must try to stay open to differences as well as similarities in understanding and interpreting music.

### Concert Performance

Chamber musicians differ in the amount of freedom they afford themselves in interpretation in performance. On one side, you have the Beijing Duo, who limit their experiments to the practice room: "On stage, sometimes we feel the need to refine some spots, but it is only in the practice room where we make changes," says Meng Su. Others, like the Méduses, throw caution to the wind, but only in improvisation:

"We program free or generative improvisation into each of our concerts, circulating around a broad spectrum of musical elements: spontaneous motifs, balance, colors, polyrhythmic textures, and dissonance and resolution, among other things. We've done this now over 200 times in concert and it is just a pleasure for us—we never

really feel relaxed and in-tune onstage until we've done some form of improvisation. As for the more traditional section of the concert program, we take special care in both selecting the right tempo and creating clear performance cues."

ChromaDuo is somewhere in between; we feel that playing on stage is not an attempt to replicate the best performance we did in the practice room; it is more an attempt to create the same conditions or mindsets that enabled us to do our best, and to keep the vivid spontaneity that can happen in private. Petrit Çeku (of Trio Elogio with Pedro Ribeiro Rodrigues and Tomislav Vukšić) describes it well:

"I think that the idea of *togetherness* in chamber music is indeed as poetic as it sounds. I have noticed through my experience of playing with Pedro and Tomislav that it takes more than practice to really be together. I find it very important to understand that you have to do more than the best you can in order to be 'together' in chamber music."

There have been some scientific studies showing that the brains of musicians playing ensemble music are linked in an unusual way. This is no surprise, but it is however, a scientific proof that if both musicians are in the right mind set, there is a connection—unexplainable to this day—between their brains that will help them play unisons, change tempos and dynamics together, even *rubato* in the same way.

I'm sure all chamber musicians will recognize that blessed moment when you decide to follow your instinct and *rubato* in a way you hadn't been rehearsing and you realize that your partners are right there with you. It does in a way restore your faith in humanity, doesn't it?

However, in order to deserve that moment—work has to be done. First of all it's impossible for your partners to follow you, if they don't know your part. What helps us as a trio is practicing



Above: Trio Elogio (left to right): Tomislav Vukšić, Pedro Ribeiro Rodrigues, and Petrit Çeku.

## Conversations About Duo Technique ... (continued)

slowly with our ears concentrated to each other's parts. That way we can also understand which part is more important in a certain moment; as Croatian wisdom says, 'We realize who's paying, and who is drinking.'"

### Beyond the Ensemble

It's true: playing in a duo is a lot like getting married. While it's important to work together, it's just as important to have time apart. It's best to spend time with your duo partner that isn't just work, and to have interests and musical enjoyment beyond the duo—even playing in ensemble with other people. Dale Kavanagh (Amadeus Duo):

"Ensemble playing is always a different and changing experience, and, with every person, it is different. Therefore, it's great to have a duo that can develop to whatever it will become by doing, doing, doing, but at the same time it is very important also to play with other people and ensembles to see and feel the other ways of doing, doing. Like a relationship, we will never have the same experience with another duo or ensemble. Each experience is unique; so experience each other—feel each other's rhythmic, melodic, articulate approach and see what happens. Playing with different musicians keeps one fresh and on one's toes and will help keep the established duo alive and well."

The bond you make through successful rehearsals, recordings, and concert performances where you connect in that magical, telepathic way, is precious and worthwhile. By observing good techniques and keeping your relationship in balance, your duo can stay vigorous, whether you are dealing with long distance, or are down the street from one another. Sérgio Assad's hard-won perspective: "As strong as the personalities are, if they manage to go over a substantial stretch of time without having a big fight, a remarkable duo appears and will eventually shine."

*Tracy Anne Smith is a member of the Toronto-based ensemble, ChromaDuo. She was joined in this article by the following guitarists: Sérgio Assad, of Duo Assad (Brazil); Randall Avers, of Les Frères Méduses (Norway/France); Petrit Çeku of Trio Elogio (Croatia); Drew Henderson of Henderson-Kolk Duo (Canada); Thomas Kirchoff and Dale Kavanagh of The Amadeus Guitar Duo (Germany/Canada); Alexis Muzurakis and Susana Prieto of Duo Melis (Spain/Greece); Meng Su of The Beijing Guitar Duo (Beijing/Baltimore).*



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## 2013 GFA Convention Review (continued)

### Tremolo Exercises

Scott Tennant's class was aptly focused on *tremolo*. A portion of the exercises he discussed can be found in his technique book, *Pumping Nylon*. Said Tennant, "The standard classical *tremolo* (*p-a-m-i*) is essentially an *arpeggio* on one string. I've found that people who have trouble with *tremolo*, almost across the board, also have trouble keeping up a steady *p-a-m-i arpeggio*. So we work on the *arpeggios* first, and usually I find that they're not incorporating *arpeggios* into their practice."

The following is an excerpt from Scott's handout based on that connection between *tremolo* and *arpeggio*. When doing this exercise (Figure 4), Scott urges players to keep their hands steady, especially with regard to the thumb, as it is the main cause of any imbalance. He also emphasized keeping the tone consistent between all the fingers.



Figure 4. Tremolo exercise.

Happy practicing!

### Chamber Music

In the early days of silent film, audiences would frequently choose a theatre based not on the quality of the screen or comfort of its chairs, as one might suppose, but rather on the reputation of the accompanying organ or piano player. Crowds would flock to the most talented improviser in order guarantee the most engaging and satisfying experience. Continuing that silent film tradition, Randall Avers and Benoît Albert, of **Les Frères Méduses**, have created original music



Above: Cavatina Duo.

and arrangements (of works like "Granada," "Tonadilla," and "La maja de Goya") to serve as a live film score to the 1927 silent film *The Unknown*, making for a highly entertaining start to chamber music at this year's festival.

Later in their afternoon concert, **Les Frères Méduses** provided a varied program of modern and twentieth-century works. Beginning with an excellent free improvisation, the duo presented a combination of original works by both Avers and Albert, some of the better known works for guitar duo like Brouwer's *Micro Piezas* and Machado's *Imagens do Nordeste*, a great mixed-meter dance from Ourkouzounov, and more, all to high acclaim.

Featuring such a large number of international artists, visa troubles and other travel delays are bound to create some organizational dilemmas. Zoran Dukić had originally been scheduled to give the opening evening concert, and after some shuffling, **Cavatina Duo** was obliged to almost double the length of their program in order to fill an evening spot, which they did effortlessly, and with no small amount of teasing Dukić for his tardiness.

A husband-and-wife duo composed of Denis Azabagic and flautist Eugenia Moliner, they combined some solo guitar works (it is a guitar festival after all) with a program of chamber works from Bach and Takemitsu, several works dedicated to Cavatina by Miroslav Tadic and Alan Thomas, along with some inevitable, and humorous, marital antics between two clearly strong-willed personalities.

I asked Eugenia and Denis how their marriage survives their rehearsals. Eugenia responded, "he is very strong-minded, like I am, and of course our ideas collide and we [do] have arguments about music and the way we approach it ... we start from very different ideas and perspectives, but at the end we meet somewhere in the middle." Denis described this as being a very positive aspect of their rehearsals,



Above: Les Frères Méduses.

**Les Frères Méduses (Benoît Albert and Randall Avers, guitars).**

**Modern Guitar Duets.**

Works by Ivanovic, Bogdanović, Machado, Brouwer, Vamos, and the artists.

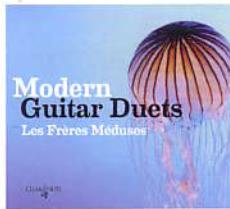
Clear Note 74574, 2012.—

*Live at Théâtre Ducourneau.* Works by Avers/Vamos, Albert/Laborde, Brouwer, and Bogdanović.

Notes en stock, no number, 2010. (NTSC DVD)

The CD here is a delectable disc. Benoît Albert and Randall Avers are Les Frères Méduses. Yes, this means the “Jellyfish Brothers.” No, I’m not going to tell you about their name, you can Google it. It is enough to know that they play exceptionally well, with absolute technical security, and flawless ensemble. Many of the works are from eastern Europe and feature the infectious mixed meters of the region. The duo sounds as if they have lived this style from infancy. All of these pieces are fine, but Dusan Bogdanović’s zoologically redundant *No Feathers on this Frog* and Atanas Ourkouzounov’s *Fantasia Bulgarica* are especially irresistible. Of the remaining works, Brouwer’s *Micro Piezas* have never sounded better, reminding the listener that although the works may be very brief, they are still aesthetically sophisticated. The duo (with collaborators in each case) also appear as composers, and they are very effective. Excerpts from Avers’ *12 Silly Songs for 12 Silly Strings* are not exactly silly, but are certainly charming. I particularly enjoyed the nostalgic “Anniversary Song.” Albert’s *Lego Land* is a fun piece, mercifully based not on Freud, but rather the building-block toys. Interspersed among the composed works are (more or less) improvised interludes which are often (though not always) effective and attractive means of articulating the formal compositions. Recorded sound is good and informative notes are provided in a well-designed eco-friendly case.

The live performance DVD may not be commercially available, being apparently more of a promotional piece. Nonetheless it is very well done with good sound, camera work, and video editing. Although navigation can be a bit sketchy, many commercial releases are not nearly as good, so see if you can find one! The program is part of what is on the CD. — Al Kunze



**Starobin, David (with Mari Yoshinaga and Daniel Druckman, percussion, and Patrick Mason, baritone).**

**New Music with Guitar, Vol. 8.**

Works by Starobin, Lansky, Ruders, and Crumb. Bridge Records 9404, 2013.



Bridge Records invaluable series *New Music with Guitar* reaches its eighth iteration with this powerful disc highlighting major works by Paul Lansky and George Crumb and substantial ones by Poul Ruders (a Bridge favorite) and David Starobin himself. Leading the program is the artist's own *Variations on a Theme by Carl Nielsen*. For an performer often identified with the *avant garde*, Starobin the composer is remarkably conservative here. Nonetheless, the work is very enjoyable and far from anachronistic sounding. His exploration of the Nielsen theme is often quite beautiful, and I particularly enjoyed the textures employed. Paul Lansky's substantial (18'25") *Partita* for guitar and percussion is quite simply irresistible. Its four movements mostly take their forms from dances of a baroque suite, but the piece is no neo-baroque trifle, but rather a fresh and inventive exploration of the magical sounds produced by the guitar with a large battery of percussion instruments. It includes a wonderful syncopated “Allemande” and a rip-roaring “Gigue” which sounds at times like a hoe-down in outer space. (When you get the disc you'll see what I mean.) Starobin is wonderful, and his partner, percussionist Mari Yoshinaga, is fully his equal. On the basis of her picture in the disc insert, I can not absolutely rule out her having more than two arms: she certainly gets around her instruments superbly. Poul Ruders' *Six Pages* come from a group of at least thirteen, and, while brief, explore innovative textures and ideas very well. In his notes on the work Starobin writes: “... all of the pieces are studies in the subtle art of creating a complete statement in a very short amount of time.” Precisely. Closing the disc is George Crumb's *The Ghosts of Albambra*. Written for for Starobin's group Crazy Jane, it first appeared on their eponymous disc reviewed in *Soundboard*, Volume 38, No. 2. At that point I wrote: “The work is very effective, sometimes sounding like *avant garde* Flamenco, if one can imagine such a thing. It is also a workout for the musical, vocal, and dramatic skills of the singer, which is not to say it is a walk in the park for the guitarist or percussionist either! The piece is by far the most modernist work on the disc, but does include moments of rhythmic dynamism and eerie beauty, particularly in the last songs, ‘Malagueña’ and ‘Memento.’” All of this is still true, and the work well deserves to appear in this series. Flawless recording quality and fine liner notes. — Al Kunze

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