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# World Guitar Ensemble

## Crossing borders and genres with a new guitar orchestra



David Tanenbaum.

The notion of assembling a large touring ensemble of solo guitarists—from different countries and various stylistic backgrounds—under a loosely classical tent screams “logistical nightmare.” Yet this improbable dream, harbored by German manager Jürgen Nimbler, became a reality in June 2003 with the premiere of the World Guitar Ensemble and the subsequent release of the group’s riveting first CD, *Crossing Borders*. Nimbler wanted to showcase the guitar in a group larger than a quartet but smaller than an orchestra. His vision is realized in the World Guitar Ensemble’s current lineup, which includes conductor Helmut Oesterreich, Thomas Müller-Pering, and Olaf Van Gonnissen, (Germany); Aniello Desiderio (Italy); Ivo Kaltchev and Sophia Kaltchev (Bulgaria); and Peppino D’Agostino, Gyan Riley, and David Tanenbaum (US).

Nimbler selected the initial repertoire with Oesterreich, who does most of the arrangements. Because rehearsal time is limited to a few days before each tour, members receive their parts by mail and master them in advance. Still, there is back and forth during rehearsals. “The role of the conductor is different with



Taking classical idioms to the outer limits.

eight soloists,” Riley says. “Everyone is chiming in.”

On *Crossing Borders* (CCN, [www.ccnimble.com](http://www.ccnimble.com)), from the first notes of the striking arrangement of J.S. Bach’s “Brandenburg Concerto No. 6,” the sound of so many guitars—Baroque, bass, electric, synth—is startling. The rich textures and timbres are mesmerizing, whether applied to the modernist classical forms of Leo Brouwer’s *Tres Danzas Concertantes* or the elements of jazz, Latin, and rock on the balance of the CD. The adven-

turous repertoire includes Ferdinand Försch’s percussive “7 5 3 2” and contemporary pieces by Riley and D’Agostino, the only composers in the ensemble. The way electric and classical guitars play off each other as they take up the melody on Chick Corea’s “Intro Spain,” is both hauntingly beautiful and emblematic of the CD as a whole.

There’s virtuosity, bravado, and a sense of fun in abundance, but the music presented a variety of challenges. The classically trained Riley was forced



Helmut Oesterreich conducts the WGE.

By Céline Keating

to rearrange his moody, complex “Mobettabutta” after original members Zoran Dukic and Laura Young dropped out of the ensemble and were replaced by Sophia Kalchev. It took him several days. “It wasn’t as simple as hacking off a part and dividing up the notes. I had to figure out who could do what and still have the parts make sense,” he explains, adding wryly, “I was careful not to give myself any more work.”

To adapt his funky solo piece “Mediterranean Spark” for multiple players, D’Agostino had to come up with new parts. “I wanted the other guitarists to play a little improv with alternating solos,” he says, “so that visually, you could see people playing from left to right and then from right to left.” A self-taught steel-string fingerstylist, D’Agostino is the only member without classical training. But, he says, “I like to jump from planet to planet.” The ensemble fulfills his dream “of bridging the acoustic to the classical world. I don’t see many differences. It’s about music.”

For Tanenbaum, known for raising the prominence of the classical guitar in chamber and orchestral settings, the ensemble represented a different kind of leap. “Friends said I was crazy,” he says. “Here I was going against what I had built my whole career on—back into a guitar ghetto.” Yet he was intrigued by the idea of community and the possibility of expanding the repertoire. “There are composers for whom the solo guitar perhaps feels too small—who need more sound and activity. I thought, let’s get some people with world-class ears to write for us.” The crossover concept was both a draw and a concern. “Crossover is on everyone’s lips,” Tanenbaum explains, “but I think there is danger in it. You can end up with a little postcard of this and a postcard of that. I was interested if it could be done with real integrity and with a lot of work put into each of the styles.”

What appears to be a narrow instrumental focus on the sonic potential of guitar has actually widened the musical scope. “I’m hearing more possibilities—of distribution and register and orchestration,” Riley says. “It’s really mind-expanding for me.” Tanenbaum agrees. “One of the beauties is that there’s room to grow,” he says. “I’ve started to play the bass [guitar] and am really loving to hear the ensemble from the bottom up. It’s a wonderful perspective.” ■



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