

GUITAR VARIATIONS

by Todd Seelye

I have always admired Charles Wuorinen's music. A recipient of both the Pulitzer Prize and the MacArthur "genius" Fellowship, he has been one of America's most important composers for a generation. Although Wuorinen has written for the guitar in combination with other instruments, his catalogue lacked a solo work. I asked him for one; he responded positively, and the details were worked out in early 1994.

Originally, the plan was for a small work. It turned out that both of us were in residence at the June in Buffalo festival in 1994 and so had some time to talk about the guitar and ideas for the piece. The scope was enlarged: I had been wishing for a "big piece" and was delighted when Wuorinen responded enthusiastically to the idea. The new work was finished that summer, and I gave the first performance the following March.

Guitar Variations follows the line of other similarly named pieces for solo instruments by Wuorinen. At over 15 minutes, it is by far the longest and most substantial. It is representative of the composer's recent style: gestures full of detail and character, a classical sense of balance, and a rich harmonic palette.

Wuorinen's music has always been associated with huge demands of instrumental technique. There is, nonetheless, nothing ungracious about the writing -- the whole piece is infused with an apparently thorough command of the guitar's resources. Particularly gratifying for me is the way the harmonies of the piece "sound" on the instrument, which suggest a tantalizing number of ways in which to color passages.

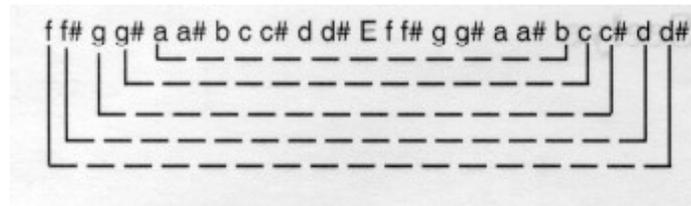
Wuorinen's music is not "tonal," but, as in tonal music, different levels of structure reflect one another. Relations can be heard between the details and the larger form of the piece, such as in the nested antecedent-consequent patterns that inform the work. For performers, this can be stimulating: the sense of "depth" lends a richness that lets one engage the score in a creative way--shaping the lines to emphasize those attributes which balance and contrast details and larger wholes, and thereby the drama of the work.

The harmonic construction of *Guitar Variations* is rich in guitar-like sonorities, the intervals produced by the open strings and related natural harmonics, such as those on the fourth fret. These intervals exist on the surface, note-to-note, and in a more imbedded way relating, say, the harmonies of a section with those of another.

Guitar Variations divides into four large sections set off by fermatas. Each of the four sections introduces newly evolved figures along with references to material already presented. As a whole, the piece has a broad bilateral symmetry, i.e., sections 1 and 2 share similar figures as do sections 3 and 4, and these two yet larger sections balance one another. The opening material in the first two pages reappears, re-composed, in the last two pages of the piece in the manner of a recapitulation. The material presented in the opening measures serves as a metaphor for the whole piece. It is "genetic" material, which foreshadows tendencies and characters the music will assume as it progresses. The apparent fantasy of the music belies its finely wrought character. Everything about the phraseology is important: number of attacks, contours, registrar boundaries, articulation, harmonies, rhythms -- all have "motivic" significance.

Throughout the piece, certain pitches and harmonies are used referentially to suggest a sense of arrival, departure, and location. *Guitar Variations* is "in" e-natural: it is the first and last pitch of the piece, with other boundary identities as well. Elsewhere in the piece, other pitches function in similar referential ways.

We can see how pitches f, f#, g, g#, and a in measure 1 are reflected by their inversive counterparts around an e pitch axis to form a musical period ending with measure 3. (See Example 1.)



A look at the opening page can suggest the nature of the variation procedure. Example 2 illustrates the successive subsuming of material into larger wholes from which the work's phraseology develops.

m.1-3	4	6	7-9.5	9.5-12	13	14-15	(16)
A	B	A''	B''	A'''	B'''	A''''	B''''
C		C''		C'''		C''''	
I			II				(III)

The music in sections A and B is essentially the same material, arranged to bring out a different aspect of the harmony. There are many imbedded analogies to the A music in the disposition of the B material. For instance, in measure 4 the pitches in the top staff are related by an e axis of symmetry with those in the bottom staff. Together, A and B form a distinct sub-section, C.

Each new section C transforms the material in a way that retains the textures of the constituent A and B sections, presenting the material in a way that recalls earlier treatment, yet introducing new figures and different contexts. The treatment of the motive in measure 2 is illustrative: in C1 and C2 these are heard piano, almost as an aside or interruption; in C3 (preceded by an up-down contour suggested by measure 4) and C4 they serve as climactic areas. (The speeded-up rhythm in C4 adumbrates the overall progress of each of the four large sections of the piece, which gradually assume faster note values.) There are many other analogies between and among these, as well as among the placement of climactic areas within this entire section (through measure 15).

A look at page two shows new music arising from older material, this time developing the contrast between chordal and single-line music.

These are some of the ways the piece works. Of course, what we make of it as listeners and performers is not constrained to any one way of hearing. For me, this is one of the great joys of the piece, as it invites active participation in its renewal during each performance and hearing.

Guitar Variations is published by C.F. Peters, Inc., New York, whom we thank for permission to reproduce the opening page. ©1994. Reproduced by permission of C.F. Peters Corporation.

This article appears in Spring 1997 SOUNDBOARD, the Journal of the Guitar Foundation of America. Reprinted with the permission of the author.

to Todd Seelye

GUITAR VARIATIONS

Charles Wuorinen (1994)

♩ = 76 - 80

The musical score consists of four systems of notation, each with a treble clef and a bass clef. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. Performance instructions are indicated by text above or below notes.

- System 1:** Starts with a dynamic marking of *p*. It includes a *pont.* instruction over a series of notes, followed by *ff*, *p*, and *f*. An *ord.* instruction is placed above a note.
- System 2:** Features a *pont.* instruction at the beginning, followed by *ff* and *p*. An *ord.* instruction is placed above a note. A *mf* marking appears later.
- System 3:** Includes a *p* marking, followed by *sf*, *cresc.*, *f*, and *mf*.
- System 4:** Starts with a *p* marking, followed by *f*, *p*, and *mf*. It includes *pont.*, *ord.*, and *cl. ** instructions.

* "cl." indicates to pluck the string at the octave node, thus producing a clarinet-like sound.

© Copyright 1994 by C. F. Peters Corporation
373 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016