

COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICES IN LEO BROUWER'S
ELOGIO DE LA DANZA
TRANSITIONS FROM HIS EARLY STYLE TO THE AVANT-GARDE

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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Leo Brouwer (b. 1939) is a Cuban-born guitarist and composer, and is regarded as the most important living composer for the guitar.¹ He has proven to be quite prolific in works for other instruments as well, writing orchestral and chamber works, concerti, opera, works for ballet and theater, as well as music for film. His styles range from arrangements of folk music from his native Cuba to the avant-garde to jazz-rock fusion. His guitar music is performed internationally, and many of his pieces have become standards in the classical guitar repertory.

Throughout his life, he has held many important positions within Cuba. In 1964, he became the head of the Music Division of the Cuban Film Institute. Beginning in 1980, he has served as the Cuban representative on the International Music Council of UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). He has also served as a musical advisor to the Cuban minister of culture and as artistic director of the Havana Symphony. Earlier in his career, he was professor of harmony, counterpoint, and composition at the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán. He has also travelled extensively as a conductor of his own music as well as that of standard

¹ Clive Kronenberg, "Guitar Composer Leo Brouwer: The Concept of a 'Universal Language,'" *Tempo* 62, no. 245 (July, 2008): 30.

repertoire, and he has also been in demand at guitar festivals around the world, offering artistic and pedagogical advice.²

Brouwer was born in Havana, Cuba, in relatively humble circumstances. He had very little exposure to higher forms of art during his youth, however he was influenced at a very early age by Yoruban ritual music (from West Africa, an important part of Cuba's heritage).³ He began taking guitar lessons at age nine from his father, who was an amateur guitarist. He began playing by ear, and by the time he was thirteen he had learned several works by Heitor Villa-Lobos, Francisco Tarrega, and Enrique Granados, and had developed a love for flamenco guitar. When he was fourteen years of age, he began more formal training from Cuban-guitarist Isaac Nicola (1916–1998). Nicola was once a student of Emilio Pujol (who had studied with the great Francisco Tarrega), and it was he who exposed him to music from the Renaissance and Baroque eras as well as to music of the 19th century. This resulted in Brouwer effectively giving up flamenco guitar in favor of more serious art music suitable for the concert stage.⁴ Brouwer studied with Nicola for about three years, during which time he absorbed a great deal of the guitar repertoire that existed at that time. It is also worth noting that he began to learn a great deal about the piano, double bass, cello, clarinet, flute, and several brass instruments.⁵

It was Brouwer's aunt who first exposed him to and taught him music history, as well as solfege and basic music theory. He was largely self-taught in the more significant areas of harmony and composition. Brouwer took notice that the great composers of the

² Paul Century, "Leo Brouwer, A Portrait of the Artist in Socialist Cuba," *Latin American Music Review* 8, no. 2 (Autumn-Winter, 1987): 151.

³ Kronenberg, "Guitar Composer Leo Brouwer," 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

20th century (including Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, and Paul Hindemith) wrote little if anything for the guitar. He decided therefore that he would take it upon himself to write for the guitar the types of music that the great composers had written. He began composing for the guitar in 1953 or 1954, and although his development as a composer was rather quick, he later destroyed many of his early works, feeling that they were unworthy of being performed and/or published. Some of these early works have been published, however, primarily because they had survived and were being performed a great deal by other performers. Among these pieces are his *Pieza sin título* and *Fuga No. 1*. In these early years, he also arranged folk songs and popular melodies from Cuba, most notably *Drume Negrita* from Ernesto Grenet (re-titled by Brouwer as *Cancion de Cuna*), and *Ojos Brujos*, by Gonzalo Roig.⁶

Brouwer studied music theory and composition for a short time at the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán in Havana, however most of his studies were completed independently, with little influence from his professors. In 1959, he was awarded a scholarship to study at Juilliard School of Music. He received minimal personal instruction here as well, and left the school after six months. From here, he went to the Hartt School of Music in Connecticut and studied composition as well as music from the Medieval and Renaissance periods. After the United States broke off relations with Cuba in 1960, he returned to his homeland and began working in several capacities, many of which are mentioned above. In addition to these responsibilities, the Cuban government

⁶ Dean Paul Suzuki, “The Solo Guitar Works of Leo Brouwer” (Master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 1981), 7–9.

has given him grants that have enabled him to concertize as a classical guitarist as well as work on his own compositions.

A pivotal event in Brouwer's life occurred in 1961, when he attended the Warsaw Autumn Festival of Contemporary Music. It was here that he heard *Jeux Vénitien* by Witold Lutoslawski; *Zyklus* by Karlheinz Stockhausen; and the premiere of *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* by Krystztof Penderecki. In addition to the exposure to the music of the European avant-garde, Brouwer was able to personally interact with many of the composers themselves. This opportunity gave him an “awareness of some of the most advanced contemporary works on the European continent...[and a] deep rooted knowledge of prevailing musical developments such as serialism, aleatoric and electro-acoustic music.”⁷ This influence certainly led to his compositions *Variantes de Percusión* (1962) and *Sonograma I* (1963) for prepared piano, the first aleatoric work by a Cuban composer. In 1964, he composed another work in the avant-garde style titled *Sonograma II*, for orchestra. In the same year he composed what is arguably his most famous work for solo guitar, *Elogio de la Danza*.

There is a general consensus that Brouwer's compositional styles can be divided into three basic periods. The first (lasting from the early 1950s until the early 1960s) is generally characterized by Cuban and Latin folk influences, whether the pieces are original compositions or arrangements of existing songs/tunes. This period will be referred to as his “nationalistic” period in the remainder of this paper. The second period (from the early 1960s to the late 1970s) features works that can best be described as avant-garde, and are characterized by atonality, indeterminacy, extended techniques, and

⁷ Kronenberg, “Guitar Composer Leo Brouwer,” 35.

extreme dynamic and timbral ranges. The third period (from approximately 1978 to the present) is distinguished by a return to a somewhat tonal or modal language, while incorporating minimal techniques, traditional African components, and programmatic music. Brouwer calls this latest period his “New Simplicity,” and says that it is characterized in part by the natural release of tension within music that is lacking in many works of the avant-garde.⁸ It is important to note that, although each period is unique, a common element among all three is the influence of Brouwer’s Afro-Cuban heritage; Brouwer has said that he “never abandon[s] a compositional element that is useful as a working tool.”⁹

Elogio de la Danza is a two-movement work with a total performance time of approximately six and a half minutes. It was written in a single afternoon in 1964 and was commissioned by Cuban choreographer Luis Trapaga. Brouwer states that he had to work quickly because the piece was to be recorded for Cuban television the next day and broadcast (with choreography) in two days. Brouwer describes his compositional process as being improvisatory, building upon “two or three ideas.”¹⁰ Because of the functional purpose of this piece, it is more conservative in nature than some of the other works that he was producing during this time, but as we shall see, *Elogio* contains many progressive techniques that are much more advanced than his earlier works, and several that anticipate his later pieces. In this paper, certain elements will be examined that demonstrate the transitional nature of this important work, especially the areas of

⁸ Rodolfo Betancourt, “A Close Encounter with Leo Brouwer,” *Guitar Review*, no. 112 (Spring, 1998): 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Clive Kronenberg, “Meeting Guitar Composer, Leo Brouwer,” *Guitar Review*, no. 129 (Summer, 2004): 6.

rhythm/meter, harmony, and timbre/dynamics. We will discuss characteristics that look back to his earlier style as well as those that are more progressive. Rather than a measure-by-measure analysis, I will provide details of the areas that seem most important to me.

Although form is not an element that will be discussed in great detail, a short discussion will be necessary to provide a frame of reference for the other elements that we will be discussing. Brouwer tends to favor concise forms, and as was mentioned above, this work contains two short movements. It is written in two movements (rather than one longer one) because the choreographer wanted to pay tribute to Grand Adagio from the classical ballet as well as to the *Ballet Russ*, which is why (as Brouwer points out), “the second movement has some of the Stravinsky flavor.”¹¹ Among the first observations that one can make about *Elogio* is the absence of a clear melody. Brouwer has said that he does not favor melodic writing for the guitar; he prefers to conceive textural writings.¹² The piece is fragmentary in design, comprised of several small sections, and lacks what can be typically described as themes; however, there are recurring ideas that help to provide unity. The first movement, *Lento*, can be described as having an overall form of AB, with a short codetta that recalls material from the opening moments of the A section. The second movement, *Obstinato*, is also in binary form and is to be performed *attacca* (with no pause between movements).

An important element in all of Brouwer’s compositions, and especially his first period works, is his use of Latin-American folk rhythms, characterized by syncopation. He generally alters and disguises these patterns so that they are quite subtle, even to the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² David Reynolds, “Estudio Sin Luz; A Conversation with Leo Brouwer,” *Guitar Review*, no. 126 (2003): 8.

point of being barely recognizable, however the syncopation comes through, adding rhythmic interest and energy.¹³ One such rhythmic pattern is the *cinquillo*:



One of Brouwer's early pieces that utilizes the *cinquillo* pattern is his *Danza Caracteristica* (1957):

Example 1: *Danza Caracteristica*, mm. 15–18



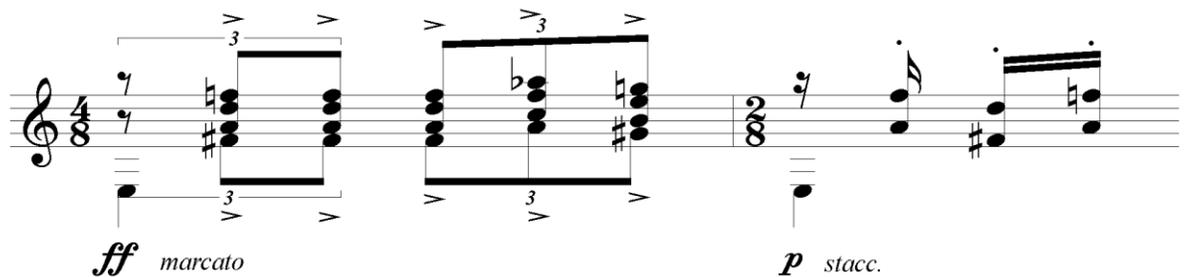
This pattern (albeit altered) can be found throughout the A section of *Lento* in measures 4, 7 (example 2), 18, 20, 21, and 23.

¹³ Roberto Pincirolli, "Leo Brouwer's Works for Guitar," trans. Paolo Possiedi, *Guitar Review*, no.77 (Spring, 1989): 4.



This pattern can be found throughout both sections of *Obstinato*. Brouwer is at times very obvious in his usage of this pattern, as in example 5 below. At other times, he obscures the pattern slightly by starting it on an off-beat (adding to the syncopated feel) and carrying it across two or more measures, as in example 6. Another characteristic of the pattern in example 6 that makes it a bit more ambiguous is that the notes are not grouped as triplets, however, the placement of the accents artificially groups the notes in threes and creates the necessary syncopation of the *tresillo*.

Example 5: *Obstinato*, mm. 11–12



Example 6: *Obstinato*, mm. 19–21

Example 8: *Lento*, mm. 12–16

Example 9: *Lento*, mm. 32–37

Brouwer's harmonic language in *Elogio* could be described as eclectic. He utilizes triads and extended tertian chords, quartal harmonies, and cluster chords. The piece has a tonal center on *e*, but functional harmony is not present. There is a I-v relationship that is prevalent throughout, but a substantive authentic cadence is not to be found.

Additionally, there is an abundance of surface chromaticism (this piece is much more chromatic than his earlier guitar solo compositions) and the free use of dissonance. As in his earlier works, there is the frequent presence of pedal tones and open strings, which assists in the idiomatic creation of cluster chords as well in as the formation of chords of very wide ranges. In this piece, it is the nearly ever-present pedal *e* that establishes the tonal center. In example 7 (above), we can see that the piece opens with the pedal on the

low *e*, and builds to a sonorous but weak dominant functioning *b* minor/major ninth chord. The end of the opening segment (mm. 8–9) features the repetition of the note *b*, articulated in harmonics and on open strings, leading to a repeat sign that will result in the immediate repetition of the opening gesture, implying a cadential point, but without the necessary harmonization to fully realize either a half or an authentic cadence.

The next brief section makes use of quartal harmonies, with an open-string *b* pedal throughout. An interesting feature of this section is that it is primarily in a meter of 3/4, except for measures 12 and 15, which feature meters of 1/4 and 3/8, respectively. During these two measures the quartal harmonies include the usage of the tritone, which, along with sudden dynamic changes, provides nice moments of punctuation:

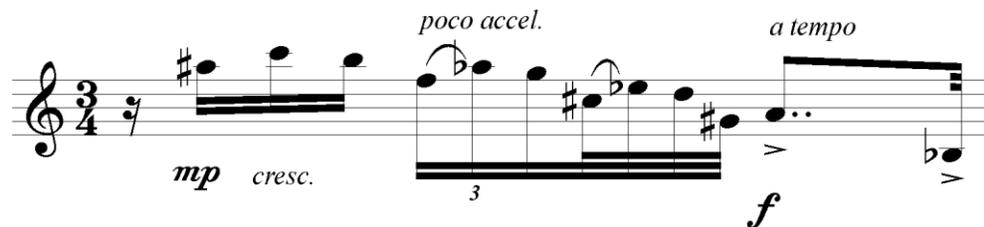
Example 10: *Lento*, mm. 10–15

The musical score for Example 10, measures 10–15, is presented in two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in 3/4 time, with a key signature of one flat. The tempo is *Lento*. The score includes various dynamics (*p*, *f*), articulations (*stacc.*, *sub.*), and ornaments (*metalico nat.*). There are also triplets and a sextuplet indicated.

As was mentioned above, small clusters can be found throughout the piece, the first episode occurring in measure 5 (example 11). Here can be found a series of four open

clusters consisting of three chromatic notes each in a descending sequence. Note that the first three clusters are in closed position, while the fourth cluster's last note is a displaced octave below, which Suzuki points out is characteristic of Brouwer's next compositional period.¹⁴ An interesting feature of these clusters is that the respective 1st, 2nd, and 3rd notes of each cell spell triads in 2nd inversion.

Example 11: *Lento*, m. 5



These broken clusters seem to anticipate a similar technique that Brouwer uses in *Canticum*:

Example 12: *Canticum*, 1st movement, 2nd system



Brouwer also uses block clusters in mm. 21 and 23. It is interesting that these small clusters are framed within the structural notes *e* and *b* (example 13).

¹⁴ Suzuki, 66.

Example 13: *Lento*, mm. 21–24

The musical score for Example 13 consists of three measures. The first measure is in 3/4 time, marked 'a tempo' and 'nat.', featuring a cluster of notes with a triplet of eighth notes. The second measure is in 1/4 time, marked 'metalico', with a cluster of notes and a triplet of eighth notes. The third measure is in 3/4 time, marked 'rit.', with a cluster of notes and a triplet of eighth notes. The dynamic marking *f* is present throughout.

Although these clusters are much smaller than those that will be seen in *Canticum*, they do anticipate the later piece, which is based entirely upon the block clusters that open the work:

Example 14: *Canticum*, 1st system

The musical score for Example 14 shows a series of block clusters on a grand staff. The first cluster is marked 'rasq.' and '6"'. This is followed by a 'G.P.' (Grand Pause) section. The second cluster is marked 'let ring' and '4"'. This is followed by another 'G.P.' section. The third cluster is marked 'simile' and '6"'. This is followed by a 'G.P.' section. The fourth cluster is marked 'sim.' and '3"'. This is followed by a 'G.P.' section. The fifth cluster is marked '6"'. This is followed by a 'G.P.' section. The sixth cluster is marked '4"'. The dynamic marking *fff* is present throughout.

The A section of the second movement features alternations of simple and compound meters along with oscillating dynamic markings of *piano* and *fortissimo*, as well as a series of split-third chords (chords that contain both a major and a minor third) in first inversion over the ever-present *e* pedal (example 15). It is possible that Brouwer employed these chords for the purpose of harmonic ambiguity, but it is more likely that he simply liked the aesthetic created by the interval of the major seventh between the

outer voices; he tends to prefer intervals of 2nds and those related to them, i.e. 7ths, diminished/augmented octaves, and 9ths.¹⁵

Example 15: *Obstinato*, mm. 4–6

In mm. 62–84 can be found several instances of a chord (played *rasqueado*), which contains two intervals of the major seventh, between the *c* and *b* as well as the *g#* and *g* natural:

Example 16: *Obstinato*, mm. 62–64

Brouwer has discussed what he calls the “law of opposing forces,” which exists everywhere, i.e., man and woman, day and night, and love and hate.¹⁶ His tendency to look for and exploit these contradictions coupled with his later technique of utilizing dynamics and timbre as structural components of his compositions are clearly manifested

¹⁵ Suzuki, 46.

¹⁶ Betancourt, 2.

in *Elogio de la Danza*. The piece is carefully and painstakingly marked regarding both of these elements. Dynamically, the work ranges from *ppp* to *fff*, and although several instances occur in which there are crescendos and decrescendos (creating a swelling and releasing effect), there are several moments that are marked by sharp contrasts, such as *piano* immediately followed by *subito forte* (see example 8 above; compare to example 12). This wide dynamic range recalls his use of dynamics in his 1962 avante-garde composition *Variantes de Percusión*, and it is quite probable that if it were not for the limitations of the guitar we would see an even greater dynamic range in *Elogio*.

The aforementioned *Variantes de Percusión* is also characterized by a variety of timbres, created by the usage of several different instruments. This certainly influenced the “orchestration” of *Elogio*, as it would seem that Brouwer is attempting to produce as many unique colors and sounds as the guitar will provide. He instructs the performer at times to play *metálico* (a thin, “tinny” sound produced when the right hand plucks the strings close to the bridge); there are also instances where the instruction *sul tasto* is given (meaning that the right hand plays at or above the fingerboard, which produces a warm, dark sound). As is common with Brouwer’s juxtaposition of dynamic contrasts, timbral contrasts are typical in *Elogio*. The *metálico* effect is immediately followed by a return to *natural*; staccatos are contrasted with notes to be played *tenuto* (to their full duration). The second movement also employs some traditional guitar techniques that add to the collection of sounds, such as *golpes* (percussive strikes on the bridge) and *rasqueados* (an aggressive strum often associated with the flamenco guitar).

Does *Elogio de la danza* belong in Brouwer’s first compositional period? Many scholars believe so, and it has been referred to as the most mature work of his early

period.¹⁷ It exhibits many characteristics of this period: a tonal center, usage of traditional Cuban rhythms, and concise forms. It has been recognized as a “throw-back” to his earlier style due to the fact that it was written after several of his [non-guitar] works that are more avant-garde in style.¹⁸ Or would it be more appropriately ascribed to his middle, modern period? It certainly demonstrates several of his later techniques as well: cluster chords, dissonance and chromaticism, fragmentary thematic ideas, no clear melodic ideas, and the use of timbre and dynamics as structural elements. The case could certainly be made for the latter because of the overall aesthetic of the piece when compared to pieces from the earlier style, most notably his arrangements of existing melodies and his *Tres Apuntes* (1959). However, the conservative nature of *Elogio*, especially when compared to *Canticum*, *La Espiral Eterna* (1971), and *Parabola* (1973), clearly distinguishes it from the later works. We must, therefore, simply conclude that *Elogio* is a transitional piece, keeping techniques that were fundamental components of Brouwer’s compositional style; these techniques are ones with which he was well-practiced and comfortable, while experimenting with a new vocabulary of expressive devices, each of which would manifest themselves much more fully in his period from the early 1960s through the middle 1970s, and continuing within his most recent works.

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¹⁷ Kronenberg, “Guitar Composer Leo Brouwer,” 42.

¹⁸ Suzuki, 65.

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