

In Search of the Great American Guitar Concerto

by John Stropes and Jim Ohlschmidt

In 1814, Mauro Giuliani was the first of the great virtuoso/composers of the guitar to write a concerto for guitar and orchestra. Andrés Segovia, in his time, encouraged many prominent composers to write additional works for classical guitar and orchestra in order to provide substantial new repertoire for his chosen instrument. Concertos by Manuel Ponce, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Joaquín Rodrigo and others can be directly attributed to Segovia's influence.

In the past twenty-five years there have been more than a dozen new works for classical guitar and orchestra written by such composers as Leo Brouwer, Lucas Foss, Giampaolo Bracali, Richard Rodney Bennett, Ivana Themmen, Stephen Dodgson, Toru Takemitsu and others. But problems in balancing the volume of even a chamber orchestra with the intimate sound of the guitar either by careful writing or electronically amplifying the instrument have persisted. Ultimately Segovia had to admit that this quest had not been particularly rewarding.

Recently, two new works for guitar and orchestra have attempted to address these shortcomings. They offer two very different compositional perspectives.

Ice Fields, by Leo Kottke and Stephen Paulus, a suite for amplified acoustic steel string guitar and chamber orchestra which premiered with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra under Paulus' direction, is a milestone for guitar

concertos. While this collaborative work strikes a bold new direction for finger-style guitar and features Kottke in a setting listeners haven't heard since his first Chrysalis LP (*Leo Kottke*) in 1976, it is clearly an adaptation of the orchestra to the Minnesota guitarist's existing work, not a series of compositions with orchestral intentions at the onset. The results of these adaptations are mixed—sometimes the orchestration that Paulus adds to Kottke's highly rhythmic and harmonically jaunty style is striking, beautiful and right. At other times, it sounds as if the two are at odds as the rhythmic undercurrent that makes Kottke's guitar playing so fascinating is buried beneath the orchestra.

French guitarist Jean Felix Lalanne's *Symphony for a Country Gentleman*, on the other hand, pursues a much more traditional course with a four-movement work that owes more compositional influence to classic European styles of the last century than to any of the present. Recently premiered with the Symphony of the Shores in Evanston, Illinois, Lalanne and second guitarist Muriel Anderson rendered a sparkling performance of the work using two amplified classical guitars which helped create a near-perfect balance between their instruments and those of the 40-piece orchestra. A variety of musical settings featured Lalanne and Anderson in both a solo and duo capacity, although Lalanne most often played the principal guitar role with Anderson supporting and adding ornamentation. Yet while the two occasionally demonstrated the kind of precision and intuition guitar duos strive for, what Lalanne has achieved compositionally is more of a stylistic test-drive for two guitars and orchestra than it is a musical impression or portrait of the country gentleman in question, Chester Burton Atkins.

Ice Fields by Leo Kottke

Article by John Stropes

Leo Kottke, finger-style guitar virtuoso/composer, has inspired a whole generation of guitarists. Since 1969 he has composed and recorded hundreds of instrumental solos and songs with guitar accompaniment on more than 25 albums. He has charted his own singular, creative course since he began to redefine the style with major technical innovations and compositional beauty, and he continues to probe the boundaries of his approach to the instrument.

While his live performances have been almost entirely as a solo guitarist (not to mention his highly entertaining role as a Midwestern, self-effacing humorist), his recordings have often included other instruments—from the simple bass, drum and piano combo on *Mudlark* (Capital), to the elegant tenor and bass trombone backing on his recent LP *That's What* (Private Music). “Range,” a twelve-string guitar bottleneck piece recorded in 1976 with a small orchestral ensemble arranged by Jack Nitzsche was an early glimpse of the potential for pairing Kottke’s amplified steel string acoustic guitar with orchestra.

Kottke’s music has often been described as orchestral. His ability to project two or three voices coherently in his solo playing, his enormous sound, the range of his twelve-string, the expanded range of his guitars when low or alternate tunings are employed all seem to make his work ripe for this sort of musical experimentation. In *Ice Fields*, each of the work’s five movements is based on an existing guitar solo chosen by Kottke and Stephen Paulus during planning sessions earlier this year. Paulus is an internationally acclaimed composer who is currently Composer-in-Residence with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Working from tapes of Kottke’s playing, Paulus created orchestral settings for these pieces, providing not only accompaniment but introductory and closing passages, occasional interludes and embellishments of the tunes. Paulus’ score maintains Kottke’s original musical language while attempting to extend the vocabulary.

The first movement, based on the tune “Times Twelve” (from *My Father’s Face*, Private Music), builds and elaborates on the playful, dance-like spirit of the original recording. The second movement, “Griddle Slide” (from *Paul Bunyan*, Windham Hill), features a lush, pop-style arrangement that provides a handsome backdrop for Kottke’s animated, percussive guitar.

Compositionally the third movement, “Ice Fields” (from *A Shout Toward Noon*, Private Music), seemed to offer the most potential for orchestration, but received only minimal treatment from Paulus. “Summer’s Growing Old,” the fourth movement, is based on a very recent and as yet unrecorded Kottke composition. Opening with a duet for guitar and trombone, it is solemn and nostalgic, and is an outstanding example of skillful, lovely interaction between the guitar and the orchestra.

The final movement, based on Kottke’s high-powered “Air Proofing Two” (from *A Shout Toward Noon*) was, at least in its premier performance, troubled by problems of harnessing an orchestra to one of Kottke’s most complex, layered compositions. Played on a 12-string tuned well below concert pitch, Kottke’s own sound was sometimes unclear while the orchestra sounded like they were struggling to catch their breath.

The premiere of *Ice Fields* was aggressively played and warmly received by the audience, but it needed more rehearsal time. However, while classical guitarists have historically had difficulty playing loud enough to be heard over an orchestra—even when the most adventurous of them used sound reinforcement—this was not an issue for Kottke, who has for years used an ever-changing variety of microphones and pickups to produce the sound of what you might imagine to be a very large acoustic guitar. The imbalances between Kottke’s amplified acoustic guitar and the chamber orchestra in this performance were more an issue of rehearsal than a tragic flaw.

Ice Fields is a ground breaking work for amplified acoustic steel-string guitar and orchestra. The powerful combination of Kottke’s highly original playing and composing styles with the musical colors and immense dynamic range of the orchestra is a natural joy. It is an idea whose time has come.

Symphony for a Country Gentleman by Jean Felix-Lalanne

Article by Jim Ohlschmidt

Jean Felix-Lalanne holds several top awards from French guitar competitions in the 1970's, including a 1978 First Place in France's National Classical Guitar Competition. Lalanne toured with French fingerpicker Marcel Dadi in 1982, and began composing French film scores soon after. A single released from his score for *Le Passage* became a Number One Top 40 hit in France. In 1987 he composed a work called *Romantic Symphony for the International Festival of the Guitar at Liege*, and since then he has released three French discs of guitar music in various styles.

The premiere performance of Lalanne's *Symphony for a Country Gentleman* offered a palette of familiar musical colors owing influence to both European and American compositional styles ranging from Baroque and Romantic themes to melodies and chordal devices bordering on contemporary mainstream pop—a pleasant, occasionally pastoral journey through changing diatonic colors and familiar tempos.

A “Largo Allegro” began the piece with a plaintive D minor motif stated by Lalanne (with ornamental harmonics by Anderson) and then by the orchestra. The interplay soon developed into a Baroque-sounding interweaving of melodies, which then dissolved into a section where Lalanne and Anderson traded solo passages which were variations on the opening melody.

An “Andante-Grave” followed, which opened with a folksy, salt-of-the-earth major diatonic melody over a catchy chordal background played by the orchestra, giving the overall impression of a pretty, contemporary pop song. This movement seemed to lumber along a bit, with few other musical sparks to highlight it. The third movement, “Waltz,” turned the spotlight to Anderson, who articulated a melody very reminiscent of Strauss above a sweeping orchestral backdrop that conjured images of palatial Viennese ballrooms and the grandeur of that era. Just as the movement

became imminently predictable, Lalanne surprised listeners with a 4/4 section featuring himself and Anderson in a harmonically attractive, delicately played guitar duet clearly one of the symphony's guitaristic highlights. The waltz melody returned before the movement was finished.

The fourth and final movement, “Andante Presto,” featured a variety of themes, marked by the return to a plaintive, D minor color, which evolved into a tremolo duet section, providing another highlight of Lalanne and Anderson's technical mastery. In another section, Lalanne executed some quick fingerpicking in an alternating thumb style, although—as with the Kottke suite—the rhythmic effect was obscured somewhat by the orchestra, which swelled behind him and intermittently overcame his playing. Yet another section of this movement offered one more very pleasant pop melody which alternated with several guitar duet passages. With its different motifs, this section stood out as the most satisfying of the four, the pace was interesting and the ending seemed to come a bit too soon.

What does all of this have to do with country gentleman Chet Atkins? Many of Chet's records, as early as the 1950's, show an eclecticism similar to what Lalanne suggests with *Symphony for a Country Gentleman*, and at moments Lalanne achieved the kind of melodic beauty and harmonic grace that Atkins has showed on some of his best recorded orchestral outings. Does it work as a guitar concerto? To the extent that it takes the players and their audience through a series of contrasting, occasionally memorable musical themes, yes.

Yet these qualities alone hardly qualify Lalanne's symphony as a work of lasting interest—it lacks the kind of originality and stylistic signature which any symphony needs to endure beyond the life (or career) of its composer. Given Lalanne's talent, he's certainly capable of a more substantial work. As a tribute to Chet Atkins, the piece only vaguely suggests its subject in ways that only those with considerably more than a passing familiarity can ascertain and appreciate.

Conclusions

In scrutinizing *Ice Fields* and *Symphony for a Country Gentleman*, several conclusions arise, regarding both these works specifically and the guitar concerto form in general. The contrasts between Lalanne's work and the Kottke/Paulus collaboration are striking. The latter is an obvious adaptation of the orchestra to previously composed and recorded guitar solos. Curiously, the most successful movement of *Ice Fields* is based on the one solo Kottke has yet to record. Lalanne's piece (perhaps because it stays well within the boundaries of classical tradition) unquestionably has a more seamless quality that suggests the piece was conceived and created as a whole.

But while the traditional, listener-friendly nature of *Symphony for a Country Gentleman* makes it more accessible, Kottke's compositional style is infinitely more distinctive and intriguing.

Both works demonstrate that today's audio technology enables the acoustic guitar—both steel and nylon strings—to be amplified with unprecedented clarity, accuracy and volume. However, a fundamental consideration is whether these works should be intended as musical explorations of enduring value, or are best left as more immediately accessible pop concerts designed to attract and entertain a broader base of symphony subscribers.

Such questions will only be answered by the composers and players. One thing is certain—the quest for the Great American Guitar Concerto has begun!