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Celebrating four decades playing together, the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet (LAGQ) pays tribute to the music and artists who inspired them along the way by crafting this program entitled “American Guitar Masters.”

The program begins with Giacomo Rossini’s Overture to II Barbier di Siviglia, one of the most popular of his uniformly brilliant opera overtures and one which has taken on a life of its own apart from the opera it introduces. The work has become a staple of the symphonic repertoire, as well as a frequent soundtrack to cartoons, most notably in the classic Bugs Bunny adaptation. John Dearman’s realization is an excellent example of the rather “democratic” philosophy of arrangement that LAGQ frequently employs. The four members of the quartet are treated as equal voices, and nearly all prominent melodies are distributed antiphonally within the ensemble.

Philip Houghton is one of the most recorded and influential Australian guitar composers. His work expresses a distinctly Australian aesthetic, reflecting the country’s vast landscapes and mystical “dreamtime” Aboriginal legends. He was famously a synesthete, wherein he saw very specific colors when hearing musical tones and timbres. “Opals” (1993, revised 2014) is a three-movement work for guitar quartet, and it attempts to capture the myriad glints and sheens that the music attempts to evoke. The composer provided the following notes for each movement:

1. A kaleidoscope of colour in and against a transparent “water matrix”…colours floating, bleeding into each other. Against a white matrix the lighter colours of the White Opal are brilliant and translucent. True in this state is what is called ‘pinfire’ (glittering points of red and green) and the “rolling flash” (which describes the effect of layers of colour which, ripple abruptly and sparkle through the stone when the stone is moved).

2. Chorale was originally commissioned by the New York City Classical Guitar Society for the New York City Guitar Orchestra in 2012. It was re-imaged for guitar quartet in this new version for the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. Based on a simple theme of three notes ascending in whole steps, Chorale is inspired by the Renaissance and Baroque choral music that I listened to in my youth. Although I’ve integrated some of my favorite jazz harmonies and rhythms into the fabric of the music, I feel that, at its core, it very much has an “early music” sensibility.

3. Although written for symphony orchestra and mezzo-soprano, it evokes the essential character of the Spanish guitar and thus finds a natural home in these settings for guitar quartet. This set of three excerpts begins with a rousing “Ritual Fire Dance”) ends the set. Vividly portraying a furious dance of exorcism, it ends with insistent chords representing the Romani people trying to stamp the spirit of a ghost out in the fire.

With the piece now complete, it feels like an emotional journey to me, almost a road trip in scale and scope. Somehow, through the challenge of writing for this unique platform and aiming it towards the hands of these especially talented players, I was able to get to a very personal area of what music itself is to me. As I was writing, my mind would sometimes flash to the stunning views of the trip up to Glacier National Park on the famous “Going-to-the-Sun Road,” right after hearing LAGQ play live for the first time at a festival in Montana. I am very excited to hear what William, Scott, John and Matt will do on their journey with this work.

THREE GUITAR HEROES

On their 2004 Grammy Award-winning release LAGQ’s Guitar Heroes, the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet paid tribute to some of the legendary guitarists who inspired them in their youth. This set expands on that concept and the LAGQ present newly created arrangements, or “covers,” of signature tunes by heroes Michael Hedges, Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa. To start is a piece by the hugely influential Michael Hedges, who created a revolution in steel-string guitar playing with his innovative tapping and open-tuning creations. Revered for his virtuosity and sonic brilliance, he was also a composer of great depth and sophistication. He took the world by storm with his groundbreaking 1984 recording Aerial Boundaries, and Mathew Greif’s arrangement of the title track presents it faithfully, providing a brief excursion before returning to Hedges’s original. It’s followed by a soulful ballad by Jimi Hendrix, America’s first “Guitar God,” in Matt Greif’s delicate setting of The Wind Cries Mary. Beginning in a quasi-minimalist style, the tune gradually reveals itself until the rocking groove locks in and we hear some of Hendrix’s patented guitar riffs. The final piece is by one of rock’s most iconoclastic and irreverently inscrutable figures, Frank Zappa. Since his satirical lyrics don’t translate very well to guitars, William Kanengiser chose one of Zappa’s most popular instrumental pieces, the funk-rock, tongue-in-cheek anthem Peaches en Regalia. Featuring a fanfare-like opening melody, the piece takes a number of musical zig and zags, venturing into quasi-discio, jazz and faux-classical.

Certainly, Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata (the first movement of Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2, “Sonata Quasi una fantasia”) needs no introduction. It stands as one of Beethoven’s most recognizable works for solo piano, eclipsed perhaps only by Für Elise in popularity. Stunningly modern in its day (composed in 1801) it became one of Beethoven’s most-requested pieces after his premiere of the work in 1802 (apparently, he played so forcefully in the 3rd movement Presto agitato that a number of piano strings snapped). The evocative Adagio sostenuto movement features undulating arpeggios murmuring under a melody that Beriozko described as: “a lament in the key of E flat major. The entire piece should be played with the greatest delicacy and without dampers,” it explores the full resonance of the lower tessitura of the piano in its most delicate, dynamic range. The baritone voice of the wording lends itself well to the guitar, which already sounds an octave lower than written (although a number of the lowest bass notes traverse even the extended range of John Dearman’s 7-string guitar). The challenge in William Kanengiser’s arrangement was to attempt to mimic the resonant sustain of the piano and the subtle pedaling effects that create its haunting atmosphere. Although no arrangement carries its own set of compromises, it is hoped that this one will shed new light on a much-loved Beethoven classic.

FROM EL AMOR BRUJO

In his Romani-inspired ballet El Amor Brujo, Manuel de Falla captured the essence of flamenco’s mystery and passion. Although written for symphony orchestra and mezzo-soprano, it evokes the essential character of the Spanish guitar and thus finds a natural home in these settings for guitar quartet. This set of three excerpts begins with a rousing Danza Rituál (“Ritual Fire Dance”) ends the set. Vividly portraying a furious dance of exorcism, it ends with insistent chords representing the Romani people trying to stamp the spirit of a ghost out in the fire.

— Notes by William Kanengiser

*Pat Metheny: Road to the Sun (2016) was commissioned through the International Arts Foundation, Inc. for the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet by the lead commissioners: Newman Center for the Performing Arts/University of Denver and Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, College of Fine + Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Additional support provided by co-commissioners: Lobero Theater Foundation, Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College, 92nd Street Y, Performing Arts Series at Johnson County Community College and Soka University of America/Soka Performing Arts Center.