Review by Colin Clarke, Interview by Robert Schulslaper

AMBROSINI *Song Book for Guitar. 3 Holograms* • Alberto Mesirca (gtr) • KAIROS 0015012 (74:49)

Claudio Ambrosini: Song Book for Guitar
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Venetian composer Claudio Ambrosini (b. 1948) composes elusive music, here collected in a *Song book*: music composed for solo guitar between 1973 and 2013. Most of the music here is not just unrecorded until now but unperformed. But from multiple listenings leading to this review, it became evident that this music demands to be heard.

Important influences on Ambrosini are Maderna and Nono, while an interest in computer music has been developed at Padua. Be slightly wary of your volume levels before you start, as the attack of the first piece, "Arie e danze," certainly has presence; throughout the piece's eight minutes, though, the music courts and teases silence as well as invoking the most gossamer textures. The recording is analytical enough for the listener to experience each and every nuance with spectacular clarity. The

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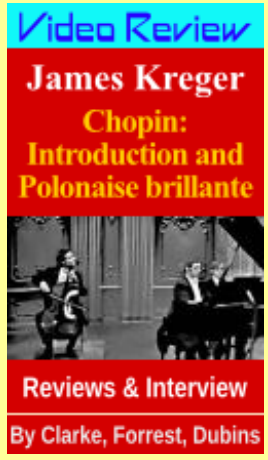

short piece "Imbrazilian" here acts as more of a question mark, separating "Arie e danze" from the "Tre Studi, 'en plein air.'" The last of these studies is perhaps a rare instance of humor in the collection. It is entitled "Bus Stop"; perhaps unsurprisingly, the portrait is remarkably enigmatic as well as charmingly quirky.

Pieces such as "Canzone d'ombre" (1973) introduce a more unsettled side of Ambrosini. It is not that this piece is outgoing; rather, one never feels that it finds its home. The nocturnes in the collection include one that has a parenthesized subtitle, "Tombeau per Jimi H."—Jimi Hendrix, obviously. The nocturnes here are not all tranquil; the "Nottorno con sogno" seems to portray a rather disturbed, disconnected dream. Unfortunately, the intricacies of the Hendrix tribute are a closed book to this reviewer, leaving only the beauty of the piece to resonate. The world of rap music is sadly inescapable in contemporary society, though, so at least I have some sort of frame of reference for Ambrosini's "Rap" (1994). Here, fingers slide on the strings in imitation of a rapper scratching his or her LPs; the music both captivates and delights.

One of the pieces least keen to give up its secrets is "Priapo assiderato" (1992); but it is when Ambrosini touches on themes of a Renaissance-like character and extends that sound into his own mode of expression, as in "Ciaccona in laborinto" (1995), that things get really fascinating. This latter piece is one of the more extended on the disc (sailing it at nine minutes exactly) and so has longer to cast its spell. The fragile "Canzone molle" (Spring Song, 1973), one of the earliest pieces on the disc, seems to carry the weight of worlds. We are a long way from a Schubertian "Frühlingslied" here, while "Canzone curva, detta 'dell'occhiolino'" from *Tre Studi sulla prospettiva* (1973) is a piece that refers very clearly back to an

Jeanne d'Arc, Le Voyage dans la Lune

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era far more gallant than ours; it is simply ravishingly delivered here.

The first of the *Three Holograms* (apparently the date is unknown) has a Latin title, "Janus ipse, dixit" (Janus, he said). As enigmatic as the music itself, it leads to the soft-grained "Rabdomante (Mosè?)." The final "Arcimboldo docet" asks the performer to add noises (sneezes and coughs) to the very disjunct musical surface. The *Holograms* seem the perfect way to close the disc, almost acting as a summary of Ambrosini's language.

The booklet notes describe Ambrosini as the "creator of a unique poetic language" before describing him as an "Andrei Tarkovsky of the guitar." Mystique is at the heart of Ambrosini's world, and a mesmerizing mystique it is, too. It is hard to imagine a finer interpreter than the young Italian guitarist Alberto Mesirca, who seems throughout so perfectly attuned to this rarified sound world. It is worth noting that the mode of expression heard throughout is very consistent, even though the pieces traverse quite a few decades.

Sadly, there is not a great deal listed by Ambrosini on ArkivMusic, although a disc of his piano music on Stradivarius performed by Aldo Orvieto (33908) has certainly caught this reviewer's attention. Given the length of Ambrosini's works list so far (composers21.com/compdocs/ambrosic.htm), it seems only right to conclude this review with a cry for more of his music to be made available, while acknowledging that Mesirca's disc is a giant step in the right direction. The idea of an *opera buffa* (*Il giudizio universale*) from Ambrosini's pen is particularly intriguing. **Colin Clarke**

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: A Conversation

with Alberto Mesirca
By Robert Schulslaper

Guitarist Alberto Mesirca's adventurous spirit has led him into some fascinating musical byways. Wandering the world but always returning to his base as a teacher at the Statal Conservatory of Adria, Italy, he promises to "keep on performing, researching, recording, doing what I love." Listening to his newest album, *Claudio Ambrosini: Song Book for Guitar*, it's clear he's chosen the right path.

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What were some of your formative experiences as a musician?

I started playing the guitar at the age of eight. Although in my family no one was a professional musician, my grandfather Giuseppe from Padua was an amateur pianist. He was a doctor and an intellectual who, through his work as a novelist (he won a prestigious prize, the Premio Campiello) and as a music critic got to know the most important composers and performers of his time, building a deep friendship with Gian Francesco Malipiero.

My father is a really big jazz fan and he made me listen to all sorts of music from a tender age, especially the free-jazz repertoire of Miles Davis in his *Live at Fillmore* period. I used to love it and still think that *Kind of Blue*, *In a Silent Way*, and *Bitches Brew* are great masterpieces (and maybe *Sketches of Spain* with Gil Evans's inspired orchestration of Rodrigo's

Concierto de Aranjuez helped me to find my way). Besides exposing me to the music through recordings, my father even brought me to the Umbria Jazz Festival (one of the most important jazz festivals in the world). There I saw a magic concert at the Arena di Verona with Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock, and Jack De Johnette as the first set, and a second set with Max Roach, Tony Williams, and Ginger Baker playing as a drum trio: truly shocking. After that I concentrated for a while on classical, but it was destiny to come back to jazz, as I worked for a period, when I was living in Germany, with a wonderful percussionist, Jonas Giger, whose father Peter has been a pioneer in free jazz on drums. With them we opened a concert of the Sun Ra Arkestra in Switzerland, another amazing experience.

At the age of 11 I got deeper into the study of classical guitar and entered the Castelfranco Conservatory in Gianfranco Volpato's class, specializing in sound research and the chamber music repertoire with strings. It was at that time that I played my first concerts and competitions. After obtaining the degree I went on studying in Germany with another great teacher, Wolfgang Lendle, with whom I improved my technique and studied the art of transcription, of which he was a true master. In those years I also played for great maestros such as Manuel Barrueco, Alirio Diaz, Alvaro Pierri, Jason Vieaux, Angelo Gilardino, and many others, and all of these experiences have been relevant for me. Maestro Gilardino especially opened my eyes by saying that what makes an artist special, apart from his playing, is the choice of repertoire. This made an immense impact on me, because it totally changed my perspective—knowing, for example, that if I wanted to win competitions, a certain obligatory, restricted, and relatively uninteresting repertoire was needed. So instead I tried to focus

on what I could be strong at, and managed at first to work on the mystic music for guitar of the 20th century, giving many world premieres—above all, Padre Donostia's *Errimina*, found in the Andrés Segovia Archive. Choosing to concentrate on contemporary music led to a recording, *Ikonostas* (the title of a wonderful piece by Gilardino himself), which won the Golden Guitar for best recording of the year in 2007. My research into this sort of repertoire led me to many new compositions and also attracted the interest of some of the most important guitar composers of our times—for example Leo Brouwer, Dušan Bogdanović, Angelo Gilardino, and many others—who were kind enough to select me as the dedicatee of their wonderful pieces.

Who are the guitarists that you most admire?

My favorite guitarist of all time is Julian Bream because he was truly a pioneer, a continuous researcher, who sparked a revived interest in Renaissance British music and commissioned works for guitar by the greatest living composers such as Malcolm Arnold, Benjamin Britten, and Hans Werner Henze—a true master.

Of course, like all classical guitarists, I've been intrigued by the sound of Andrés Segovia and John Williams; among jazz guitarists, my favorites are Marc Ribot (with whom I've had the luck to work for the Frantz Casséus recording and publication), Bill Frisell, Fred Frith, Django Reinhardt (Bream's favorite guitarist!), and Wes Montgomery. Then among true geniuses in the development of the instrument I'd like to mention Robert Fripp and Jimi Hendrix (loved by important contemporary composers such as György Kurtág).

Are you attracted by so-called world music?

Editorial

The Problem of Label Advertising and Artist Support

By Joel Flegler

Critics' Corner

A Critic's Response to The Problem of Label Advertising and Artist Support

By Phillip Scott

If it's good, pretty much! I used to love the Peter Gabriel series of World Music and then I really fell in love with the Mali blues and kora [an African string instrument, part lute, part harp] music. The depth and power in that genre is truly unique, and mentioning Ali Farka Touré or Boubacar Traoré [famous Malian musicians] would be just reductive. Then I got really interested in the Sephardi tradition while making a recording with the wonderful mezzo Romina Basso; and then, through my work on the Musical Archive of the Beyazit National Library in Istanbul, I was exposed to the wonderful and huge tradition of Turkish popular, classical (Ottoman), and religious music.

Your work in Turkey seems to have given you a taste for scholarly pursuits.

You might say that! In the field of musicological research I've published and transcribed the previously unknown *Fantasias and Ricercari* by Francesco Canova Da Milano, the greatest Italian Renaissance lutenist, which were contained in a 1565 lute manuscript held by the Parish of Castelfranco Veneto. Also, together with the immensely talented Marc Ribot, we've published all the guitar works of the Haitian master Frantz Casséus for Zimmerman.

Do you play other instruments?

No, I don't, I think I wouldn't have enough time to learn how to play one instrument properly in this life!

Do you improvise or compose?

I like to play on the instrument and try to improvise, but this is a discipline that would require a lot of concentration and time, and a development of the playing itself, which is quite different

from my daily routine. What is missing in classical musicians, though, is the development of the ear, of listening, and of the complete mastery of the fretboard as an immediate consequence. I'd love to compose and I did sometimes write something, but practicing or performing masterpieces by great composers gives me a bit of a sense of inferiority, so I've decided to keep on performing music written by others while trying to find my personal path of interpretation, rather than writing on my own.

Is chamber music important to you?

I love chamber music and I love playing with other people. I am sure that a strong point in my improvement as an artist came from chamber music, which made me think in a way which wasn't too bound to the guitar but was more "transcendental." Along the way, I had the privilege and honor to play with fantastic performers such as Daniel Rowland, Domenico Nordio, Martin Rummel, Vladimir Mendelssohn, Alexander Sitkovetsky, Andras Adorjan, the Ex Novo Ensemble, and many others. In addition, I have a marvelous tango quintet in partnership with a genius of the bandonéon, Marcelo Nisinman, violinist Daniel Rowland, double bassist Zoran Marković, and pianist Natacha Kudritskaya. We perform old traditional tangos, the Piazzolla original quintet repertoire, and new compositions by Nisinman himself.

Do you commission music?

I love to work with composers and I try to ask them to write for the guitar as much as I can, as the guitar is still regarded, by the majority of symphonic composers, as a "second class" instrument. I love to work with young talented composers (recently for the Ex Novo Festival in Venice with Francesco

Pavan, and then Filippo Perocco, and Marco De Biasi), but I've also been honored to be the dedicatee of marvelous compositions by the greatest guitar composers of our times, Leo Brouwer, Angelo Gilardino, and Dušan Bogdanović.

You're not only well acquainted with contemporary classical composers but you've become a friend and collaborator of legendary King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp.

Although I was coming from the classical field, through a connection with Bert Lams (a member of the California Guitar Trio and a former student of Fripp himself), I was encouraged to visit Mr. Fripp at a masterclass in Sant Cugat, a monastery close to Barcelona. The impact of his presence, knowledge, and genius has been truly important to me. I was honored to receive from him the manuscript of the Moto Perpetuo from *Fracture*, which I decided to include in a recording dedicated to British guitar music, giving it its proper importance as a true classical composition in the company of works by Dowland, Britten, Berkeley, and Maxwell Davies, alongside the Suite No.1 from the album, *Giles, Giles and Fripp*.

What led you to devote yourself to learning and performing Claudio Ambrosini's long-hidden guitar works?

The first time I heard about Ambrosini was during a talk with the great master composer Angelo Gilardino, who admires him very much. I contacted Ambrosini a few years ago and I was surprised to discover that he had written a lot of music for guitar, that he himself was an amateur guitarist and lutenist, and that most of his guitar compositions had remained unperformed for a long time. Some of them had not yet been brought to fair copy [corrected manuscript], but they were so perfectly idiomatic for the guitar, and this, coupled with the

fact that I would have the possibility to play works that deserved serious and widespread attention, led me to decide to dedicate a record entirely to his music.

Why do you suppose he was reluctant to reveal his guitar compositions to the world at large?

I believe that he thought of them as studies, research into timbre, if you like, which didn't include the necessity of public performance. However, when he eventually re-evaluated the material he became convinced of the contrary. Additionally, he may have been inhibited by a pervasive misunderstanding of his style, which to some was seen as nostalgic, and aimed at a non-existent past. Such an attitude is not without its ironies, as in the fields of chamber and symphonic music Ambrosini has always been considered avant-garde: He himself conceives of tradition as merely a starting point, and it should be pointed out that this music, dating from the 1970s, is absolutely modern in tone.

How long did it take to prepare the music for the CD and did Ambrosini work with you as you were developing your interpretation?

In total it was three years, during which the pieces had been progressively learned, studied, practiced, and perfected with the constant presence and advice of Maestro Ambrosini. Our method at first consisted in performing the prepared pieces personally for him, but as soon as I managed to enter into his music world it got easier and faster to make home recordings, send them to him and then discuss via mail, telephone, or Skype.

Then, when the pieces were in the best shape I would go to the studio and record them, and even then Maestro Ambrosini

would listen to them for further improvements or corrections. The interesting thing was to see Ambrosini at work also as a composer, because many of these pieces were relatively old, and put in a corner for many years, so sometimes they required a few changes, which he did on the manuscript after long reflections.

What are your plans for the future?

Currently I'm preparing for concerts with Romina Basso, Marcelo Nisinman, and Zoran Marković, and for various solo and chamber music recitals. I'm also recording a CD of Spanish music in March and will be presenting the music from the Ambrosini recording in concert in Bologna and Milan.