

CLASSICAL GUITAR



Newman & Oltman Debut and Record New Duo Piece by Leo Brouwer

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Cuban composer Leo Brouwer's new guitar duet, *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios*, dedicated to the New York-based Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo, has been recorded by the pair at WGBH studios in Boston for release in February on the MusicMasters label.

Laura Oltman explains, "Significant about this new piece, which Brouwer completed in Havana in December 2018, is that it was commissioned by and for people in the USA, which has not happened or even been entirely possible for a long time. It is Brouwer's first composition for U.S. guitarists in nearly 40 years. One lesson of this experience is that international cooperation has produced an exceptional work of art, a gift for the entire world to enjoy."

The title of the piece (in English, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*) is taken from a book of the same name by 20th century Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, among the greatest writers in the Spanish language. It is not a novel, but rather a scholarly compendium of mythological creatures from all over the world.

Michael Newman recalls, “Maestro Brouwer told us he was intrigued by the dramatic scope of the book’s characters, and he was inspired to create the duet for us based on six of the beings described by Borges: the Unicorn, the Minotaur, Fairies and Gnomes, the Gorgon, and the Manticore.”

Oltman continues, “Although the beings are imaginary, they are metaphors of reality, which I think is what Brouwer is trying to express. Brouwer said that he does not write music that literally depicts a subject. He is trying more to capture the observer’s response to an image, which is a technique he developed from film scoring.”

Newman says about the music, “Certainly the piece is often recognizable as characteristic of Brouwer’s diverse styles, but overall it does not sound like any other composition he has written. For one thing, it does not obviously borrow from Cuban folkloric music. And the dialogue between the two guitars is often intensely polyrhythmic.”



Michael Newman, Jeffrey Nissim, Leo Brouwer, and Laura Oltman at the New York premiere performance in June 2019 at Americas Society.

“The process to get this piece written took several years,” Oltman recalls. “You can imagine how complex it was, with all the friction between the U.S. and Cuba, especially now with the new anti-Latin America administration in Washington. We received help and advice from many sources, and we want to thank the board members of Raritan River Music in New Jersey, which is the non-profit organization that commissioned the work. We also want to especially thank Jeffrey Nissim, who funded the commission, as well as this first recording of the work on the MusicMasters label. Sebastian Zubieta of Americas Society—our partner with the New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes—was incredibly patient and helpful about getting Brouwer to New York for the premiere performance. He also was a great advisor on the commissioning process and the shifting legal situation between Cuba and the U.S. Finally, we want to thank some Cuban expatriates in the U.S. who offered insights—Elias Barreiro, lifelong friend of Leo Brouwer and retired guitar professor at Tulane University; our great friend Rene Izquierdo, guitar professor at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee; and Orlay Alonso, Mannes alumnus and head of Seconda Prattica music publishing company.”

“Next on the recording is *Musica Incidental Campesina*. This is a different kind of popular music—from the Cuban folkloric tradition. It is more like Brouwer’s earlier compositions in that it is more nationalistic than much of his later music.”

Michael Newman adds: “The recording engineer for this project is Antonio Oliart, audio engineer at WGBH studios in Boston. Antonio is another Mannes alum on this project. He is a flutist with an incredible ear for balance and a keen eye while reading scores. Having a great musician in charge of capturing the presence of the guitar, the sound of the ensemble, and the dynamic range of the instruments makes all the difference in the world. He does the broadcast recordings of the Boston Symphony in Boston and at Tanglewood. He has also recorded artists such as Chick Corea and Vince Giordano and produced tons of recordings for many of the top international record labels. We’d like to add a special thanks also to Mannes alum and trustee Tony Rudel of WGBH in Boston—who is also executive director of Classical.org and station manager of WCRB—for helping produce this recording.

“With this recording of Brouwer music,” Newman continues, “Jeffrey Nissim is relaunching his MusicMasters label, formerly a retail company selling compact discs in brick-and-mortar stores; only now, it will focus on digital media and to be available on all platforms. The recording will be available for streaming and download as well as CD, and we’ve heard that it may also be released as a limited edition vinyl record.

“MusicMasters parent company, Musical Heritage Society, owned by Jeff’s father in the 1960s and ’70s, was a leader in direct marketing, as a mail order record club—a progenitor of Amazon. MHS was the U.S. distributor for some of Brouwer’s first European recordings.”

Below, Newman & Oltman perform the first movement of the Brouwer work, an evocation of the Unicorn in Borges’ The Book of Imaginary Beings:



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fuu_N4cjpTk