

BROUWER POWER

By Carlos Rafael Rivera



Although not aware of it at the time, my first encounter with Leo Brouwer occurred in Panama when I was 12 years old. My older brother had returned from a weekend retreat with an audio cassette (remember those?) of Ozzy Osbourne's *Diary of a Madman*. And I—in no less than a minute's moment—had, upon listening to the title track, immediately claimed loyalty to whoever it was playing such heaven-sent guitar on that recording. The music was otherworldly—eerie yet gorgeous—awakening in me a smile I was not aware to be wearing throughout my first nor countless subsequent listenings.

I became rather obsessed with Ozzy's guitarist Randy Rhoads, an obsession undoubtedly aided by my becoming an electric guitar student. Until the day came when I was able to play "Diary of a Madman" on my guitar, note for note. The feeling was bittersweet—or rather sweetbitter—since the initial elation of such technical achievement being my own was soon overtaken by the harsh realization that those other-worldly notes I so loved were someone else's. Thus

came the inspiration for my first steps toward the very wondrous and wearisome path of musical composition.

And I would have happily attributed my career choice to the great Randy Rhoads, had I not taken classical guitar lessons with the Cuban guitarist Carlos Molina, who introduced me to a very short guitar study—Leo Brouwer's *Estudio sencillo* No. 6. It was like finding

out the sky had been green all along: My favorite guitarist had "borrowed" Brouwer's simple study. This new realization brought in me an immediate shift—a sea change—and my curiosity for all things Brouwer was born in that instant.

And boy, was there plenty to be curious about!

Aside from Brouwer the guitar composer we are here tonight to celebrate, we cannot forget that there is also Brouwer the film composer (*Like Water for Chocolate*), the conductor (who founded and led La Orquesta de Córdoba for nearly ten years), the guitarist (*De Bach a los Beatles*—if you do not own this recording, do not walk, but run to your nearest computer and order it!) and the pedagogue. (If you have witnessed any master class with him, and his charisma alone has not floored you, his passion for music, and the sincerity with which he shares it, is inspiring enough to send you to the practice room for a good week and a half with no food or sleep.)

Yet we are here to enjoy his guitar music—so we should know a few things about it.

First, his choice to study guitar was followed by an immediate affinity for the contemporary music idiom, which led him to compose his first pieces, such as *Prelude* (1956) and *Fugue* (1959), where he emulated composers such as Bartók and Stravinsky while infusing them with an Afro-Cuban rhythmic effect.

Many Latin-American composers began their careers as ardent musical nationalists. They felt responsible for carrying out a reconciliation between the more advanced techniques of European modernism and the melodic and rhythmic elements of folklore from their own countries. Such was the case with composers such as Heitor Villa-Lobos, Carlos Chávez and Alberto Ginastera. This nationalistic phase becomes the first of three composing styles that would broadly define Brouwer's musical output. During this time, he made arrangements of Cuban folk melodies such as *Drume Negrita*, collected by Eliseo Grenet and reworked by Brouwer using refined jazz-based harmonies.

To further his musical education, Brouwer went to America as a fellow of the revolutionary government. He studied composition at The Juilliard School and then taught at Hartt School, which allowed a more direct contact with the avant-garde music scene that was taking place. He was later invited to Europe, where he came under the influence of composers such as Luigi Nono and Hans Werner Henze, propelling him toward his second stylistic era—the avant-garde—of which both *Canticum* (1968) and *La espiral eterna* (1971) are excellent examples.

Onto his last stylistic era—one termed by Brouwer himself as “Hyper-Romantic.” This style takes on an approach to form and character from minimalist composers such as Steve Reich, while maintaining

a prevailing and unique lyricism in his music. One of the best examples of this “Hyper-Romantic” style is, without a doubt, *El decamerón negro* (1981), composed for Sharon Isbin.

We shall listen to a bit of each compositional style during this evening's performance, performed by musicians who are as passionate about their playing, as Brouwer is of writing the notes. And I am hoping there are at least a few members in the audience who have never heard Brouwer's music before. If so, then *welcome to the real world*.

I should say I did meet Leo Brouwer in my 20s at a guitar festival in Quebec where he was the guest artist. My teacher, who was lecturing there on Latin-American guitar music (and for whom Brouwer composed *Canticum*), had brought me along to perform my first work for guitar as an example of “newer” Latin-American works. I had taken about 40 copies of my score, giving them away to whomever feigned interest in the music. Brouwer had noticed this throughout the festival, and pulled me aside. I was nervously expecting an admonition regarding being too pushy, yet was surprised when he told me how great it was to see a young composer making people aware, one by one, of their music. He went on to say he had done the same and given of himself completely, both physically and spiritually, to his chosen profession in order to create awareness of his work. “*Dale palante*” or “keep going,” he said. Maestro Brouwer, thanks to you, I still am.

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