

Finding a voice in the American classical guitar vernacular: the work of Andrew York, Benjamin Verdery, Bryan Johanson, and David Leisner.

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Perlak, Kimberley Shelley

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Abstract

This treatise focuses on four classical guitarist-composers who found their “American voices” and played key roles in the creation of a distinctive sound in contemporary American classical guitar music: Andrew York (b. 1958), Benjamin Verdery (b. 1955), Bryan Johanson (b. 1951), and David Leisner (b. 1953). Their work illuminates the quintessentially “American” guitar vocabulary that has become a common vernacular in American classical musical culture. These American guitarist-composers stand out in their generation for several reasons. First, each has found an instantly recognizable voice in performance and composition by forging meaningful bonds between the popular musical idioms of his American cultural background and the classical tradition. Second, each is recognized as a prolific composer in what this treatise dubs the “American classical guitar vernacular.” Third, their music represents the broad spectrum of stylistic approaches to this vernacular. Leisner and Johanson are closer to the art music (classical) end, while York and Verdery provide a more direct link to popular styles. Fourth, their personal success stories have legitimized the American classical guitar vernacular in classical composition and encouraged the development of similar styles within the broader international classical guitar community. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it examines the process by which American guitarists “find an American voice” within a chosen stylistic dialect. Second, it defines the specific musical vocabulary -- technical, interpretive, and aesthetic -- of the American guitar vernacular and studies the way it is integrated within the parameters of the classical style. To do so, it examines the lives and works of players who were among the first to embark on such a process within their professional community, setting their artistic perspectives within the broader context of American guitar culture. In a broader sense, this study explores how our relationships, collaborations, and perspectives as players both reflect the American experience and shape our national sound on the guitar.

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Finding a voice in the American classical guitar vernacular: the work of Andrew York, Benjamin Verdery, Bryan Johanson, and David Leisner, freud in the theory of sublimation.