

TECHNIQUE

ARTURO TALLINI

INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY MUSIC



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LESSON DESCRIPTION



In this primer on Contemporary Music for the guitar, Arturo Tallini presents a basic analysis of several pieces and discusses their impact on the development of music. The past sixty years contain a breadth of different musical languages, many of which deviate substantially from classical traditions. Tallini introduces pieces that slowly becomes less and less familiar, discussing the cultural context and the musical practices that are being questioned and transformed. Many pieces seek to represent ideas, emotions, or even man-made objects in new and unique ways, often requiring the performer to develop an enhanced attention to detail.

Elements are taken from vastly different musical styles, and often, the performer is given the task of creating a piece from a score that contains only fragments of a melody. Performing and listening to non-traditional music is often challenging, but it allows for both the maturity of the artist and deeper understanding of the thoughts of other human beings. Good luck, and get ready to rethink how you approach playing the guitar!





ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR



Arturo Tallini graduated from the A. Casella dell'Aquila conservatory in Italy and went on to win several awards in national and international competitions, including the First Prize at the Michele Pittaluga International Classical Guitar Competition in 1987.

While never abandoning traditional repertoire, Tallini has had a diverse career exploring contemporary music for decades. He has given concerts as a soloist worldwide.

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NEW LANGUAGE



In this lesson, Arturo Tallini is going to talk about contemporary music, also known as music written in our generation. It's important to realize that this definition is very broad, and technically includes *any* music written being written today. Any piece written in the last sixty years might be called contemporary, but within this definition there are many different musical languages- each completely different from one another.



To illustrate this, let's begin with two examples of contemporary music composed for the guitar. One is the third movement, "Fuoco", of "Libre Sonatine" by Roland Dyens. This piece uses percussive effects that are very non-traditional. This is to say that they are not found in Giuliani nor in Villa-Lobos, but have come from more recent developments in the instrumental language. Second is the second movement of "Sonata" by Alberto Ginastera. This piece also contains percussive effects, but of a completely different style.

Left: "Fuoco" by Dyens, Right: "Sonata" by Ginastera

While the Dyens excerpt is clearly in the key of E minor, the Ginastera piece is based on sonorities created by very natural-feeling gestures on the guitar. This lack of clear tonality is one of the many elements that defines the style of non-traditional contemporary music.

CONNECTING TO COMPOSERS

To truly dive into the subject, let's begin to look at repertoire from composers who have given us this new musical language. Some examples of contemporary composers include Ginastera, Berio, Lachenmann, Ferneyhough, and Bussotti, among many others. While their music often requires techniques that are demanding, it also provides an opportunity for the artist to glimpse into the hidden meaning of a new world. This lesson will provide the tools to understand and execute a piece that requires doing unfamiliar things on the guitar.



At the very root of understanding this music is searching to understand what another human being is asking of us through their musical notation.

Before beginning, Tallini provides an anecdote that sheds light on the kind of determination required to truly satisfy the requests of a composer. In 1984, Tallini was recording a CD of contemporary music for the RCA label. While he was recording a piece for two guitars with Vincenzo di Benedetto, the composer, Flavio Scogna, asked Tallini to lower his sixth string by two notes, from E to D, while playing. He did just what the score asked, but the composer, surprised and a bit disappointed, asked if it was necessary to hear stopping points while he rotated his hand to tune down. Tallini replied rather bitterly that it was!

When he went home, however, he came up with a way to continually tune down a string without having to reset his fingers. He put a piece of clay inside a tuning tool to make it sticky, and attached it to the peg. This allowed him to make tuning a string sound like a trombone slide.



Why is this piece of clay so exciting? First, the composer was excited because he saw his idea truly come to life. Second, Tallini learned how to look for alternative solutions, outside of the methods taught in conservatories, to realize a composer's musical ideas. For him, it was an act of love for what was being asked. This began his relationship with non-traditional contemporary music, one that has continued to this day.

For the artist, also thought of as an interpreter, it's interesting and exciting to find repertoire that distances itself from established tradition, such as that of Mozart and Beethoven. It has already been about one hundred years since Debussy, when music began to separate from the tradition of tonality. Slowly, music has moved towards a balance of sounds and silence, and even noise, as well as ways organize notes other than tonality.

HOMAGE TO DREAMS



Let's begin this journey with a piece called "Suoni notturni" ("Sounds of the Night") by Goffredo Petrassi.



Petrassi was one of the major Italian composers of the 1900s, and he wrote two pieces for solo guitar. "Suoni notturni" is from 1958, and "Nunc" is from 1971, but this lesson will focus on the former. When first studying this piece, Tallini was struck by a strange mix of old and new that he couldn't explain. In the first page of the score, there are several moments where tonal chords are hidden, obscured by a non-tonal texture. Depending on how deeply you look, you may find many more.

G major 7

Bb major 9

There is also a flamenco sounding chord which appears within the texture. Why would Petrassi, who doesn't write in a tonal style, hide tonal chords in a piece? Even stranger is that none of these chords relate to one another- there is no tonic-to-dominant motion or any other familiar cadence.

These isolated chords become like ghosts, in a sense- hard to find but hidden within the modern world. They are remnants of another world, a past time. When Tallini realized this, he discovered that this piece is really an homage to dreams.

Petrassi did something with music that our brains do with our reality when we dream. He took parts of reality- notes, chords, tonalities that we recognize, and inserted them into a context that isn't natural. They become somehow unrecognizable, just as how we often need a psychoanalyst to help us understand our dreams. Petrassi creates a musical description of the work of nighttime, during a dream.

KEY TAKEAWAY

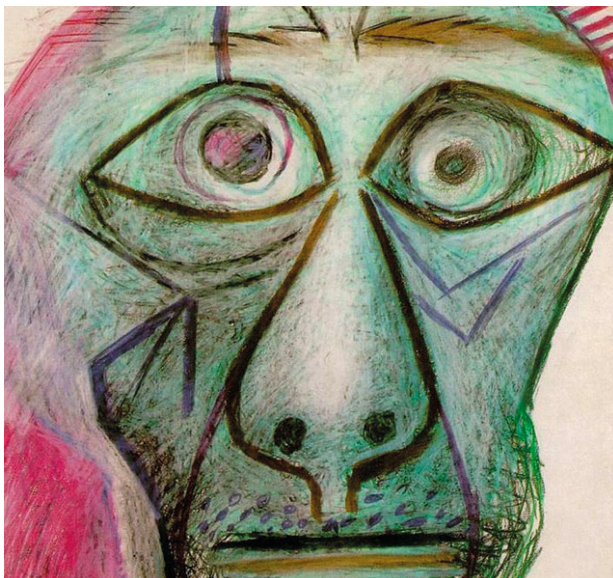
In "Suoni notturni", or "Sounds of the Night", Petrassi often hides tonal chords within an atonal texture, representing the way our brain distorts reality while we dream.



ANXIETY



It's natural to ask what kind of dreams this piece describes. Tallini is reminded of Gregor Samsa, a character in Kafka's early 20th-century novella "The Metamorphosis", where a man suddenly wakes one morning to find he's transformed into a monstrous, grotesque bug. Petrassi writes about very turbulent dreams—dreams of the modern man in 1958 who had been through two wars and seen dramatic psychological, aesthetic, and cultural changes to his world.



Anxiety is a distinctive quality in this culture and a common thread in Petrassi's piece. To Tallini, paintings by Pollack, Picasso, and Mark Rothko suggest a similar anxiety. The painting on the left is a Picasso painting titled "Self-Portrait Facing Death", from 1972, reflecting his anxieties one year before his death.

The fifth page of this piece is an unbroken string of sixteenth notes. This might appear monotonous, or very static, at first, but closer analysis shows something that is always in perpetual motion. In almost every measure, the meter and dynamics change. Basically, there's a continuous agitation that can be felt through the entire page.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL



“In this piece, attention to detail is half of the work.”

Paying attention to every small detail that Pitrassi writes makes the meaning that much more clear.

Since works by Giuliani and Sor might contain very little to no expressive markings, most guitarists aren't used to following extremely detailed instructions. However, this is another defining characteristic of non-traditional contemporary music.



In classical music, the idea of a gradual crescendo, which softens at the end of the phrase, is central to expression, and detailed notation isn't necessary. Non-traditional composers, on the other hand, make the deliberate choice to make very sudden gestures that often lack unity with one another.

GINASTERA



Let's look next at Alberto Ginastera's "Sonata", a substantial gift to the repertoire. Ginastera was an Argentine composer, and his fourth and final movement takes inspiration from an Argentine dance called the "malambo". It's a lively, yet elegant dance. To represent this unique quality, Ginastera changes the meter very frequently, just as Petrassi did. However, the dynamics are much more classical and unidirectional.

The meaning of these qualities is different for Ginastera than it is for Petrassi. In Petrassi, the changing meter conveyed a sense of anxiety without rest, while Ginastera uses it to describe vitality and continual growth of energy.

DANCE

The element of the Argentine dance, and Argentine folklore in general, is essential to this piece. Since Ginastera's goal is to convey vitality, a quality of the body, it makes sense to involve the body in all the gestures you make while playing. Tallini actually practices this piece by dancing along to it while he plays.

"I believe that when we play, our bodies should accompany the music"

Russian pianists often teach from this same point of view. Even a small gesture of the fingers is inseparable from the rest of the body. Clearly, the fingers do most of the work, but the movement is felt everywhere in the body, especially in a piece such as this.

Tallini shares a simple exercise to help develop a sense of exactly how to embody vitality and engage the body while playing this piece.



He will stand up and sing the rhythms of the piece while stomping along to the downbeats of each measure. This helps engage the full body in the music and create that feeling of vitality.

SPEED

It's often risky to play this piece very fast, since it might start to sound a bit like Morse code rather than a pattern of metric accents. Certain notes have to feel more weight than others in order for the energy of vitality to shine through.

Ginastera indicates the tempo in two separate ways, as well. He writes "presto e fogoso", and "Quarter note = 160", as well as "eighth note = 320". This way the tempo is always understood as the bar lengths change.



There are places in the Ginastera piece where the guitar is asked to play very loudly, beyond what it is commonly thought to be able to play.

BERIO



Let's switch gears now to another piece, where the guitar's limits are pushed even more. This piece is "Sequenza XI" by Luciano Berio. Berio was an incredible Italian composer who helped push the direction of music in the past sixty years. This piece is one of the thirteen Sequenzas he wrote. Each are journeys into the technical possibilities of a different instrument, and this one was written for the guitar.

Similar to the ways Petrossi and Ginastera did, Berio takes elements from the history of traditional music and uses them to create his own language. The technique of tapping, invented by rock and jazz guitarists, appears here quite often. So does the rasgueado, and other elements taken from flamenco.

RHYTHMIC GROUPINGS



It's important to note that Berio only takes certain elements from these techniques. On the first page, it's a common temptation for guitarists to want to play a page full of traditional rasgueados. Instead, the technique should be used to play a series of tremolos. The grouping of the tremolos creates a feeling of emotional intensification. They come in groups of fours, fives, sixes, and, finally, nines. Again, this is a heightened level of detail that helps to construct the meaning of the piece.

Here, Berio uses the grouping of rasgueados to achieve an effect similar to a crescendo.

The image displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of three staves. The first staff begins with the instruction 'accel.' and a tempo marking of $[♩ = 60]$. It features a series of rhythmic groupings: a group of 4 notes, a group of 5 notes, and a group of 6 notes, each marked with a triangle and 'x6'. The dynamics are marked 'ff' (fortissimo). The second staff continues with groups of 3 notes, each marked with a triangle and 'R'. The third staff shows groups of 9 and 10 notes, followed by a group of 3 notes, also marked with triangles and 'R'. The score illustrates how the grouping of rasgueados increases in complexity and length, creating a sense of tension and intensification.

Since the piece is already at fortissimo, Berio increases the grouping of the rasgueados to increase the tension instead of growing even louder.

MADERNA

This next piece moves even further away from the classical tradition. It is entitled “Serenata per una satellite” by Bruno Maderna. Maderna participated in some of the most significant changes to music in the 1900s, writing a similar piece for solo ten-string guitar called “Y después”. “Serenata per una satellite” was written in 1969, after Maderna saw a satellite just before it was to be launched. The score itself is very non-traditional, consisting of phrases written on many staves going in many directions on the page, perhaps evoking the feeling of an orbiting satellite.

Es. 20. **A UMBERTO MONTALENTI CON AMICIZIA**

SERENATA per una SATELLITE
di Bruno Maderna (1969)

TEMPO GENERALE
♩ = 42 o 92 o 132 ca.

so schnell wie möglich - p oder f immer mit großer Leidenschaft!

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Printed in Italy - 133425

Click here to listen to Tallini’s recording of “Seranata per una satellite”, off his album “Rosso Improvviso”.



Maderna allows the performer to choose the starting and ending point to the piece, dividing the role of composer. Each phrase is very clear and decisive, but the interpretation is unique to the performer. This piece can even be played by many other different instruments, not just guitar!

It sounds like a bit of a contradiction to improvise using written notes. What's being asked is to use the written notes as building blocks of a construction. On top of that, there are many symbols that aren't musical notes at all, but figures that look like two staves collided with one another.

All this notational uncertainty poses the central question of what should be considered part of the piece itself. Should it all have some musical meaning? Tallini believes strongly that yes, all of the markings that don't immediately look like music are parts of the piece. They put the player in a sort of trance where they are only conscious of the symbols on the page, and always influence the sounds that come out in some way.



IMPROVISATIONAL PROCESS



When Tallini recorded this piece, he used a process called overdubbing to record two phrases on top of one another. To him, this creates a rhythm that sounds almost South American- a bit lopsided and strange within an impressionistic context.

For the end of this piece, Tallini wanted to develop the trance-like feeling of playing the score by deconstructing the sound. He moves from an arpeggio centering around the note B, into noise and then pure rhythm, before all that is left is the out-of-tune guitar and silence. In classical music, a piece ends a standard way with only a slight degree of interpretation allowed. Here, the interpreter finishes the piece any way they like, proving quite a challenge for any artist!



More than just a piece of repertoire to learn, Maderna gives us a compositional project that changes each time and is full of surprises. Tallini has played it about 200 times as of this video, and while many elements have remained similar, he's never played it the same way twice.

In any improvisational setting, things that you think will happen rarely happen exactly as planned. Rather, you must respond to the sounds you create yourself, and that is the thrilling part!

PISATI

Let's take another step deeper into non-traditional forms of contemporary music with a piece called "Chahack: intrusione della ciaccone per eccellenza", by Maurizio Pisati. Tallini had the idea of beginning a concert with Bach's Chaconne, continuing it with purely improvisation, and ending it with a contemporary piece that was related to Bach somehow.

The result is this piece- divided into six panels, with each panel containing many recurring elements. Every panel contains a quote from Bach's Chaconne as well as other instrumental or rhythmic gestures.



The goal of each panel is to pass between these two worlds, each separated by three hundred years of linguistic development, without “betraying” the other style. This game becomes very difficult and complicated very quickly. Accompanying all of this is an electronic track created by the composer that echoes some of the modular ideas in this piece.

Pisati recently created a new version of this piece that contains a video as part of the score. The video is a sort of “page turner” that signals the performer when to play each panel and when to switch from Bach’s vocabulary to contemporary vocabulary.

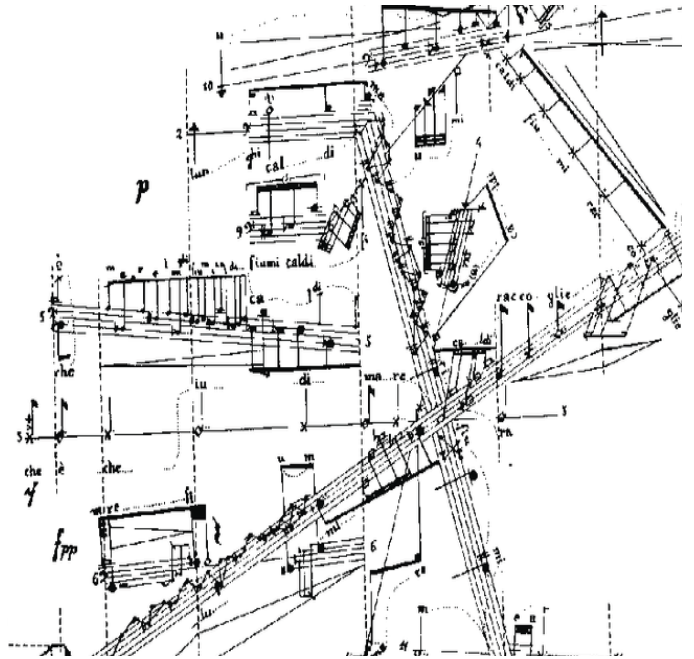


All art is informed by the art that comes before it, whether that’s painting, poetry, or music. The definition of “contemporary music” seems to strictly define the style of a piece, and Tallini prefers to think in terms of good music and bad music. Artists should remain concentrated on finding ways of communicating efficiently, rather than on adhering to a particular style or genre.



BUSSOTTI

To finish this video, Tallini will look at “Sulvano” by Silvano Bussotti. Bussotti is known for his scores, like the one on the right, that are very unusually arranged, similar to Maderna. The title of the piece we’ll look at is the composer’s first name, but there is a letter of the Greek alphabet, a lowercase upsilon, in place of the letter “i”.



This piece was conceived for spoken voice and anywhere from one to three guitars. Tallini had the desire to challenge himself and perform the entire piece himself- reciting the text and performing the multiple parts on guitar simultaneously.

The text tells a dramatic yet ironic story of ending love. Tallini builds a scene between himself and the guitar, in which the two are lovers ending their time together.



Towards the end, he stands the guitar up on its base and releases it so it bounces off a chair, lightly vibrating the strings.



The text during the finale is “It’s raining... November 1969... once and for all a hopeless sigh.. Breaths in the darkness... Rara is gone! Don’t forget her.”

CONCLUSION

Following that dramatic goodbye between two human beings in love, Tallini offers a less dramatic goodbye to this video! No video under an hour in length can cover non-traditional music in the detail it deserves. Tallini began his relationship with this music in the mid-1980s, yet is still surprised at what there is to find.

Hopefully, this information has started some kind of a spark of interest. This music is naturally complex, difficult, and it takes courage to listen to it. It requires reevaluating from scratch one’s own habits on the instrument and how one approaches the guitar. For example, in the piece by Pisati, he had the idea to place chopsticks in between the strings to play the basic rhythm of the “Chaconne” while singing.



One thing that is clear in this music is that it's asking performers to go beyond and expand the way they conceive their instrument. This has the dual function of opening inner doorways within yourself, and connecting you to composers who are currently writing the history of music. The best result, however, is connecting you more closely to another human being and becoming able to understand their thoughts through a musical score.

As a final thought, get used to looking at a score in great detail, and always leaving the door open for different ways of doing things. Tallini believes this makes us all better and more aware interpreters of the traditional classical repertoire as well. We give these pieces deeper attention, finding more connections with our true selves.

We hope this lesson helped you to develop a basic understanding of contemporary non-traditional music, and we encourage you to begin exploring some of the pieces that Tallini touched on. Good luck, and be patient as you develop your ability to listen to an entirely different language of music!



RESOURCES



Tal Hurwitz's Lesson on "Fuoco"

If you are unfamiliar with contemporary music, or just looking to get your feet wet gradually, this piece by Dyens is a terrific place to start!

Thomas Viloteau's Lesson On How To Learn a Piece

Check out this lesson on how to successfully learn difficult and challenging pieces. This is the best place to start to get your practicing organized and see results faster!



