

REPertoire

ISAAC BUSTOS

Un Dia De Noviembre



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“OUR TECHNIQUE HAS TO BE A VEHICLE THROUGH WHICH WE CAN FACILITATE THE COMMUNICATION OF THESE EMOTIONS THROUGH THE GUITAR.”

LESSON DESCRIPTION

In this lesson, Isaac Bustos talks about Un Dia De Noviembre, a gorgeous piece by Leo Brouwer, and walks through many sections that students often struggle with. He grounds his recommendations in the emotional intent of the piece, the element he considers the most important. By giving tips on hand coordination, fingerings, and execution of certain specific techniques, Bustos helps students maintain legato, melodic clarity, and get the right colors. Each of these helps bring the music closer to the emotional intent of the composition.

At the conclusion, Bustos gives tips on persevering while practicing. Though the practice routine can be difficult, never give up and your intent will continue to be better communicated.



ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR



Isaac Bustos holds an impressive number of top prizes in over 12 major international competitions, 7 of which are first prizes.

Bustos is a featured artist for the Vgo Recordings label and has just released his second album titled "Canciones a mi Madre".

Since 2005, Dr. Bustos has served on the faculty at Texas A&M University Department of Performance Studies where he is head of guitar studies and artistic director of the Texas A&M International Guitar Symposium and Competition. History

OUTLINE

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HISTORY AND EMOTION



Bustos is here to talk to us today about “Un Dia de Noviembre”, (“A Day in November”), by Leo Brouwer. It’s an iconic piece in the guitar repertoire, written in 1927 for a film by Humberto Salas of the same name. The film touches on themes of disappointment, sadness, anxiety, disillusionment, and the inner conflict these emotions bring. Brouwer’s original orchestration, used in the film, was for guitar, flute, bass, and percussion.

The piece is effective because it’s melody is simple yet evokes all of these emotions very clearly. The melody alone can bring to life the full depth of the emotional content of the film. Brouwer feels that, as musicians, we can get caught up in the technical analysis of work- but the technique is only part of the story. The context and meaning of the work is the most influential part, especially for the composer themselves. Through the music we can see what inspired the composer, and how they view the world.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for guitar. The top staff is in 2/4 time and features a melody with various techniques: a triplet (0, 1, 3), a sixteenth-note triplet (3, 4, 4), and a sixteenth-note pair (2, 4). Two notes are circled in red. Above the staff are markings 'BV' and 'BIV'. Below the staff is the instruction 'mp dolce ad espressivo'. The bottom staff continues the melody with a circled '2' above a note and circled '4' and '3' below notes. It includes markings 'VIII', 'rit.', and 'A tempo'. A circled '1' is below a note. To the right, it says 'arm XII (m.d.)' and 'mp' with a hairpin.

Emotion is universal and all human beings can connect to them, even if we haven't experienced the same depth of negative emotion that the movie might depict. Our guitar technique has to be a vehicle through which we can communicate these emotions. The choices we make for fingerings, dynamics, articulations, and everything else about the music all impact the way the emotions are communicated. Three or four notes, played with conviction, can convey depth of feeling more effectively than words ever could. While Bustos talks through the piece, he'll always try to talk about the emotional purpose so his students can connect with others through the music while performing. In Bustos' words, "Let your soul speak through your fingers."

ORCHESTRATION AND TEXTURE OF THE A SECTION



It's important to recognize right away that this piece is in two sections- an A section in A minor and a B section in A major. The A section has a ternary structure within itself- an ABA. Over the next few sections, Bustos talks about using orchestration, legato, and awareness of technique to connect the emotions to your sound.

The first thing Bustos does is separate the melody from the accompaniment. He wants his students to obtain a clear sense of how they want the melody to sound.

In the beginning of this piece, he tries to imitate the sound of the flute.

The flute plays very legato, with a connectedness that only a wind instrument could bring, so, on the guitar, he tries to obtain this by reaching notes at the same time with each hand. If you mute a string too early, the legato is lost. Try playing the first three notes of the piece and reach the C with the left and right hand at the same time, thinking about and anticipating the next note until it becomes comfortable.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for guitar. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 2/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with several notes, some of which are circled in red. Above the staff, there are markings for fingerings: 'BV' above the first two notes, 'BIV' above the next two notes, and '-4' above a note. Below the staff, the instruction 'mp dolce ad espressivo' is written. The second staff continues the melody and includes a circled '2' above a note, a circled '4' above another note, and circled '4' and '3' below notes. To the right of the second staff, there are markings for 'arm XII (m.d.)', 'A tempo', and 'rit.'. The dynamic marking 'mp' is also present at the end of the second staff.

We can now focus on expression by playing the melody by itself. While playing, always be clear with your texture. The accompaniment or bass should not be louder than the melody. By separating each line, we can keep the balance and focus on crafting the emotional content of just that element.

Bustos urges students to experiment with other ways to communicate that element differently. As an example, he plays the melody several different ways by itself- “bright”, “warm”, with more vibrato, and with rubato, and each one conveys the emotions in different ways. Each student must decide for themselves what their personal view of the piece is, and this will guide their hands.

After we experiment with the melody we can turn to the other parts of the texture- the bass and accompaniment. A common pitfall for guitarists is to accentuate the thumb when it’s used with other fingers, but this causes the bass to be too overpowering.

Students should try to only use flesh on the bass and nail on the treble, softening the bass right away and improving the clarity of the texture.



LEFT HAND FINGERINGS

The first eight measures contain many opportunities for common left hand mistakes. Measures 3 and 4 contain a tricky left hand change.

Common finger elements, or fingers you can use throughout a section, can be used as pivot points for the entire hand. This will help maintain stability on the fingerboard, and to achieve legato playing as well.



Start with the 3rd finger on the A, and the A minor shape is already formed. Moving from one chord to the next is much easier now- the second finger can stay put for the next chord, and the fourth finger can stay put for the chord after that. Lifting your fingers too much, or leaving the strings too early, will result in cutting the sound off prematurely. Proper execution ensures legato playing. Bustos goes through the same section very slowly while pointing out the most troublesome releases.

BARRE AND SLURS

Another section, starting in measure 9 (the second part of A section), involves shifting hand position and playing a barre on the fourth and fifth frets.

The composer gives us a rest in measure 10 while executing the slur from B to C. Each measure of this section, in fact, has a rest on the third beat for the accompaniment.



During those rests, circled above in red, you can release the barre to shift your other fingers. This helps us be more musical, stay relaxed, and, of course, maintain legato. Lift before shifting throughout this entire section. The use of open strings on the E, B, and G in bar 15 is recommended.



Using open strings also gives you time to shift your hands. While it's possible to barre the slur at the end of bar 15, releasing the C at the beginning of the bar frees up that string, sounds more musical, and makes a barre unnecessary.

Lastly, the slurs in this passage are very important as expressive elements. Slurring a phrase softens the second note, making it sound much more vocal. During an ascending slur, always try to land in the middle of the fret to get the best sound, landing on your fingertip using the weight of your wrist instead of flat. Move your wrist slightly to accommodate this.

A common pitfall is for the first note to be plucked too hard, and the two notes won't sound even. To fix this, don't play the first one too loud, but just loud enough that the second one speaks.

B SECTION AND PERSEVERANCE

The B section, in A Major, contrasts the A Minor of the A Section. Be aware of how this changes the character of the piece- sad and anxious to a little bit more optimistic. One of the most technically difficult spots is in measure 28- the stretch from the high E to the seventh fret.

If your hand doesn't quite have the flexibility yet, practice just a single element at a time. Focus first on obtaining a clean high E with your pinky while your other fingers move around. You may have to rotate your pinky slightly to achieve this, but don't let the sound of the high E get shrill or thin. Once you can keep the other fingers flexible, add the low the B.

Next, try to isolate the barre itself. Your wrist may stretch more than usual to accomplish this, but sometimes that's ok if it's in service of the music. Once that feels comfortable, play the barre in context, after the high E, and make extra sure that you're reaching the D on the third string.

Lastly, in this measure, the strings often buzz when you start out, but accept it's just a part of the learning process. Don't give up or feel discouraged if the strings buzz for a day, or a week, or a month even. Learning an instrument teaches us about our own perseverance, and how capable you can truly be- keep trying and one day it will all fall into place!

MELODIC CLARITY



Now Bustos talks again about texture, but as it pertains to measure 28.

The goal in this section is to keep the melody highlighted, so he urges students to play everything other than the melody softer. Playing balanced will also make it easier for the hands to execute. Since our hands like to work together- squeezing hard with the left hand means we often play harder with the right hand. Students will want to pluck harder, but to maintain clarity, resist that urge.

We want the right hand to be a lot more relaxed than the left, even if the left is squeezing hard. Many of the B section passages, (Ex. measure 31), require us to consciously play the non-melody notes softer.

PRACTICING RHYTHM



The rhythm in measure 35 is also often struggled with.

With his students, Bustos will speak all the notes that form the rhythm - a kind of training-wheel exercise.



They'll speak or clap "one-two-three-four, one-two-three" a bunch of times, slowing down on the one-two-three, as if they were triplets and the first one-two-three-four were sixteenths. This underlying rhythmic structure is really important to get right before we can execute the phrase on guitar.

Next he'll play the same counting rhythm on a single string of the guitar.



When we're ready to start working with the rhythm of the piece itself, he'll have students say "one-two-three-four, one-two-three", and gradually make the "two" in the triplet softer, and softer, until they aren't saying it at all. If students can't say it or clap it, he won't let them play it.

Lastly, we're ready to play it in time. He plays the phrase, but plays two F#'s in the place of the one so that the full triplet rhythm sounds.



Then, just as he does while speaking, he'll gradually play the added F# softer and softer until it disappears completely.

In the conclusion, he speaks briefly on the subject of practicing. It's important to work on each of these things very slowly. Slow practice can be the most eye-opening- it can uncover things that aren't clear or clean, and allow you to focus on what's missing from our playing. As Bustos explains it, "Build from the bottom, and then move your way up".

Don't feel discouraged by the learning process if you don't get things right the first time. Certain things take more work than others, so try to enjoy the process as you go through it. Separate things out and be very detailed with what you work on. When this practice is done musically and with intention, connecting will become easier and your intent will be better communicated.

Good luck!



RESOURCES



Leo Brouwer's lesson on Un Dia De Noviembre

Now that you've had a great, practical approach to this piece, it's time to be inspired with a lesson on this piece from the composer himself, Leo Brouwer!

Isaac Bustos's lesson on Prelude BWV 999 (Bach)

If you enjoyed Isaac's teaching style as much as we do, why not check out another lesson from him, this time on Bach's Prelude!



