

REPertoire

JOAQUIN CLERCH

El Decameron Negro (Leo Brouwer)



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“WHEN WE PLAY A PIECE WE HAVE TO FIND THE KEY THAT OPENS SOMETHING INSIDE OUR HEARTS AND MAKES US HAPPY. EVERY GUITARIST SHOULD FIND THAT IN A PIECE.”

LESSON DESCRIPTION



In this insightful lesson, Cuban guitarist and leading worldwide pedagogue Joaquin Clerch breaks down “El Decameron Negro” by Leo Brouwer. Fully understanding this piece requires a lot of historical explanation, which Clerch does very thoroughly, by describing the stories that inspired this composition and which musical elements correspond to certain plot points.

This piece contains a lot of other stylistic influences that should guide an informed interpretation, ranging from Cuban Pop to avant-garde Polish minimalism. Finally, he goes on to provide many useful technical tips across each page, and countless demonstrations of difficult passages and how he approaches them. Good luck, and enjoy making music with Joaquin Clerch!





ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR



Joaquín Clerch (born 1965 in Havana, Cuba) is a classical guitarist and composer. He was a close friend and protégé of Cuban guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer.

Clerch is a leading guitar pedagogue as Professor of Guitar at Robert Schumann University Düsseldorf. His students have won international awards and honors in major competitions, including the prestigious Francisco Tárrega International Guitar Competition, in which his students obtained the first prize four years in a row (2004-2007).

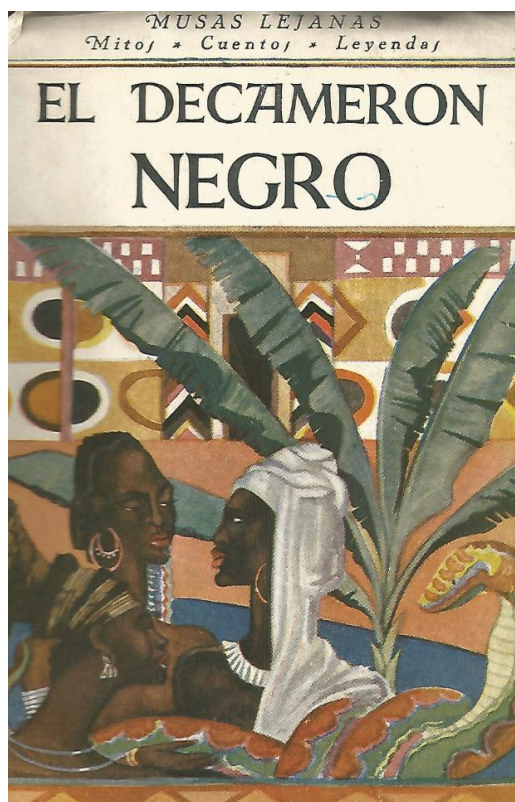
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INTRODUCTION



In this lesson, Joaquin Clerch analyzes and discusses "El Decameron Negro" by Leo Brouwer. As a young musician, Joaquin came to develop a close relationship with this piece. He first chose to play it because of a fascination with the title.



The word "Decameron" can refer to many things- it initially reminded Joaquin of "The Decameron", a famous collection of novellas by the 14th-century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio.

However, the piece is in fact inspired by a collection of stories told by an ethnic group in the Saharas, and first published in writing by the German sociologist Leo Frobenius in 1971 (pictured on left).

To understand the meaning of this piece more thoroughly, it's highly recommended that you find and read any edition of this book.

Brouwer claims to have taken inspiration for this first movement, "El Arpa del Guerrero", or "The Warrior's Harp", from a story about a violent warrior who wanted to change his lifestyle and learn a musical instrument. Further analysis of the stories, however, shows that it is much more likely that Brouwer gathered fragments from many stories in the book and combined them to form the basis of his composition.

Regardless, the beautiful opening chords in a frantic $\frac{5}{8}$ meter create a very exciting atmosphere that indeed resembles the life of a warrior. As will be discussed in detail later on, it's important to not let any open strings ring too long in this piece. Follow Joaquin's suggested fingerings to stop the strings on time.

In the fifth bar, Joaquin uses a combination of apoyando and tirando to get variation in the accents.



Handwritten musical score for guitar in 5/8 time. The score includes two staves of music with tablature and fingerings. The first staff starts with a key signature of one flat and a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 70$. The second staff continues the piece with a *simile* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as *f*, *p*, *cresc.*, and *simile*.

While this music doesn't directly come from African sources, there is no doubt that many characteristics of phrasing are inspired by African music. When Joaquin heard African music for the first time, he discovered that the text they place on certain syllables naturally creates accents in the phrase.

Switching between apoyando and tirando replicates this technique on guitar. The accents are no less a part of the music than the notes themselves. The second page continues to add to the energy and excitement. Continue to stop the bass notes so they don't ring into the next phrase.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for guitar, consisting of three staves. The notation includes various dynamics such as *p*, *pp*, and *f*, and articulation markings like *legato* and *p/4*. Performance directions include *cresc.*, *poco a poco*, *Cedendo*, and *Un poco sostenuto lirico (lyrique)*. The score is heavily annotated with fingerings (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), accents (marked with $\hat{\cdot}$), and other performance instructions. A copyright notice "Copyright international garanti" is visible at the bottom right of the score.

The mood of the piece changes at "Un poco sostenuto lirico", suddenly becoming very beautiful. As an aside, Brouwer first wrote "El Decameron Negro" piece to be performed by Sharon Isbin, and, while it is still in $\frac{5}{8}$, this section "has to do with love", in the words of Joaquin.

COUNTING AND FINGERINGS

Next comes the chorale. Count very carefully here to ensure you stay inside of the $\frac{5}{8}$ meter.

Musical score for guitar. The top staff shows a section marked "Tranquillo" in a red box. Above the staff are guitar-specific notations: "XII VII", "0 0", and "p". Below the staff is the word "oscuro". The bottom staff continues the musical notation with various chord and fingering markings.

Joaquin suggests counting 1-2, 1-2-3 in each measure, instead of 1-2-3-4-5. This way, the rhythm of quarter note to dotted quarter note is accurate, and it's harder to get lost.

A musical staff in 5/8 time. The first measure contains a quarter note (1) followed by a dotted quarter note (2). The second measure contains a quarter note (1) followed by a dotted quarter note (2) and an eighth note (3). The counting "1 2 1 2 3" is written above the staff.

Slow down a bit *before* the rallentando to prepare for the beautiful sonorities that end this section. The dynamic level grows after the second ending. Joaquin wants to take his time in the 5th and 6th bars after the second ending, and play with more haste over the next two bars, even though the shape of the phrase is very similar. He suggests a specific fingering that allows him to play the phrase more quickly.

All of his fingering modifications can be seen on the Annotated Lesson Scores on the tonebase website.

Annotated musical score for guitar. The score is heavily annotated with handwritten notes, including fingering (e.g., "2 0", "X X X", "M i M", "a M", "3", "4", "5", "6", "7", "8", "9"), dynamics (e.g., "p", "p/5", "p/6", "p/6 f", "narc.", "p/6"), and other markings (e.g., "C7", "C9", "prima"). A red box highlights a specific phrase in the top staff.

BROUWER'S PROCESS

The second movement of the piece, “La Huida de Los Amantes Por El Valle De Los Ecos” translates to “Flight of the Lovers Through the Valley of Echoes”. At Letter C, the text “Primer Galope de los Amantes” describes the “First Gallop of the Lovers”.

II. La Fuite des Amants par la Vallée des Échos
LA HUIDA DE LOS AMANTES POR EL VALLE DE LOS ECOS
LEO BROUWER
(1981)



It isn't certain exactly which stories in “El Decameron Negro” these images come from, but, again, it is likely that they are meant to evoke the general characteristics of many stories within the book. Regardless, try to use the many beautiful words and phrases from the score as inspiration while playing. Visualization can add a lot of important emotion to the music.



Joaquin adds a bit about how Brouwer approached composition. Brouwer's early music was very inspired by contemporary Polish composers of the 1960s and 70s, notably Krzysztor Pendercki (pen-der-EZZ-kee), and Witold Lutoslawski.

A common trend for many composers in the 1970s, that continues to this day, is a technique called *minimalist composition*. Minimalism is the exploration and repetition of small melodies or cells of notes to create textures. The goal is to try to create more music using fewer ingredients, and to explore all the different possibilities they contain. The influence of minimalism is especially notable in this second movement.

Growing up in Cuba, Brouwer was also exposed to a lot of jazz music. Jazz musicians use modified (also called “extended”) chords, containing more notes than a chord might usually contain. These extra notes can do a lot to influence the emotional power of the music. The opening chords of this movement contain many notes that are slightly reminiscent of jazz harmonies.

A *Declamato pesante*

M/1

♩ 2 (5) (4)

1 3 2 3

d. vibrar

p P P P P

D-sharp, E and B imply an E-major seventh chord

B *Presage*

♩ 2

λ M a μ i p 0

1 3 4 0 0 4 3

d. vibrar

E, B, F# and D suggest *either* an E9 or E-minor ninth chord

In the beginning of the second movement, Joaquín chooses to play on the fifth, fourth, and first strings, where there is more *sonority*. The harmony will be very open, since Brouwer, by excluding a third, doesn't define the outlined chord as major or minor.

At letter B, we don't hear a D-sharp anymore, but a D-natural instead. This changes the tonal structure, but still leaves ambiguity about whether the piece is major or minor.

To Joaquin, there is also a hint of Cuban popular music contained in the opening measures. If you're familiar with the style, imagine Cuban vocals gliding over the first few lines of the second movement. The result is something somewhat resembling a Cuban pop song!

It's important to find the element within a piece of music that truly speaks to your heart. For Joaquin, Brouwer's music is both beautiful to play and full of valuable opportunities for the beginner to work on different right hand positions. In this way, the piece not only makes him happy, but is a valuable tool for learning and development.

TECHNIQUE

The second section, "First Gallop of the Lovers", contains beautiful repetition and development of a small motivic cell.

C **Primer Galope de los Amantes**
(Musical notation) **Poco a poco accel.**
[x 4] **4** **6**
G A B C G A B C G A B C G A B C
pp (2^o, 3^o, 4^o, = rapido)
p **p**

As the piece goes on, this development continues and expands quite beautifully.

Joaquin admits that it was Brouwer's music that forced him to improve his technique. The first movement teaches a lot about preparing notes and stopping bass notes, while the second movement requires Joaquin to keep his right hand more stable for fast arpeggiations.

On the last line of this page of letter C, note that Joaquin has modified the strokes to obtain a varied sound between the accents of the phrase.



In each group of four notes, the third note is played as a free stroke, where the finger remains in the air rather than landing on a string. This creates a different sound for that note, preventing the music from feeling too repetitive.

Imagine, at letter F, that the four notes of the first measure slowly *sing* the words of the title: "El Re-cuer-do". This should help you to gauge the proper speed of this section- slow and *tranquil*, as the score suggests.

To Joaquín, the important part of the piece is next- "Through the Valley of the Echoes". The note immediately before each accented note should be very soft, like an echo. It's very common for guitarists to err here, and play the final note loud in anticipation of the coming accent, but it's essential that it be soft.

When you play the forte note with your p finger, have your a finger already prepared on the first string. This prevents a slight pause in between or a reduction in tempo that might diminish the energy.



Joaquin will spend a lot of time practicing this section with all the strings muted in his left hand. This way, he can hear the attack of his finger and develop accurate strokes without hearing the ring of the strings. Finally, note that the *a* finger is only used for the first E of the measure, and *p* is used for every other E in the section.

THIRD MOVEMENT

The last movement is very much like a *ballada*, a ballad. This section requires you to pay more attention to how you use anticipation, preparation, and control of the sound.

Right before the low D in the second measure, slightly raise your right hand above the strings. This allows you to shift your fingers in preparation for the melody that follows.



Stop the E in the third measure with your *a* finger so it doesn't ring over the D that follows. Joaquin will use *apoyando* (rest stroke) here to get a sound that he likes.

III. Ballade de la Demoiselle Amoureuse
BALLADA DE LA DONCELLA ENAMORADA

LEO BROUWER (1981)

Moderato II^p

p *i* *p* *â* *p* *p* *â* *p* *p*

sempre lirico

M *p*

At the “a tempo” on page 10, try to use the side of your right thumb for the first few notes of the arpeggio to get a very smooth and rich sound from the strings. Remember to prepare your fingers for the higher strings so that the tempo is smooth.



Continue this technique throughout the next few measures wherever the phrase repeats. Understanding how to organize your right hand in a phrase makes it possible to get a beautiful sound that is still relaxed and comfortable.

Joaquin recounts a story that he believes might have inspired Brouwer for this movement. It is entitled “Doncella” from Frobenius, a Spanish word meaning a beautiful young maiden. In this story, there is a very handsome, yet cowardly, prince, who is known for staying with young maidens rather than going off to fight for the village. This is upsetting to the fathers of the girls, as custom in this part of Africa is for men to be fighters and warriors. However, when the prince falls in love with one special Doncella, she recognizes his reluctance to fight and, when the call of battle comes, steals the prince’s clothes and weapons at night and goes to fight in his place. When the battle turns out to be a false alarm, and the prince hears what this girl does for him, he changes his ways and takes up the life of a true warrior. To Joaquin, parts of this movement bring to mind images of this story. Try to imagine yourself which sections might correspond to elements in the story, and visualize the setting while you play.



FINGERINGS



The "piu mosso" begins a very rhythmic section. It's necessary that you prepare your fingers during this phrase in order to execute it quickly. Prepare *pim* for the beginning of the 2/4 measure, and in any other fast runs that cover many strings.



In the following line, shown below, Joaquin is often asked why he doesn't use his *i* and *m* fingers to play such fast sixteenth notes, which would surely be easier. However, Joaquin feels more secure keeping right hand fingers tied to certain strings- the thumb on 4,5,6, index on 3, middle on 2, and ring on 1. Other fingering changes Joaquin made, he did so to play the music more precisely. Since every player is different, fingering decisions are up to the individual, and each person should strive to play in the most comfortable and relaxed way possible for their own level and style.



At a later *piu mosso*, played around 32:30 into the lesson, the tonality changes to D Minor. At a fast tempo, the shift from this measure to the F# in the next can be very difficult.



To make the shift easier, prepare your right hand fingers for first position while playing the first measure, as in this image. Joaquin choses to keep his i, m, and a fingers curled up in the first half of the measure, and only stretch out his right hand in the second measure, so that a is on the first string.



Just as before, Joaquin likes to keep right-hand fingers tied to their respective strings whenever possible. In the second measure of *piu mosso*, he feels much more comfortable playing with i on third, m on second, and a on first.

Especially when notes are played mezzo-piano or softer, prepare your fingers well in advance whenever possible. Joaquin practices this measure with open strings to reinforce the pattern in the right hand.

Whenever you play a low D or E on the first beat of a measure with lots of sixteenth notes, as in later sections of the second movement, prepare your finger just *before* playing the low string.

LEARNING FROM THE BEST

Joaquin learned a lot of guitar fingering technique by watching videos of guitar performances. As a young musician in Cuba, all he had access to was an early video cassette machine, but he nevertheless studied the fingerings of virtuosos like John Williams and Manuel Barrueco very closely. Today, with far easier access to videos of performances on the internet, this remains a powerful way to learn!



STOPPING NOTES

Guitar, by its nature, is a very *resonant* instrument, in that the texture created by allowing the strings to vibrate freely is very pleasing. Many guitarists utilize this characteristic a bit too much, almost to a fault. In the same way that using the sustain pedal on piano can be dangerous if harmonies are changing without release of the pedal, if every note a guitarist plays is allowed to ring, too many harmonies can sound at one time.

Very often, if there is a rest or another harmony immediately after a chord, it's necessary to stop all the strings from vibrating so they don't ring longer than is written in the music. It also happens to be a strong stylistic element of Cuban popular music to stop notes at the end of the beat. In the video lesson, Joaquin plays examples of a few pieces, demonstrating the difference between stopping notes and leaving them to ring.

CONCLUSION




"The techniques I use a lot today are due to Leo Brouwer. Playing his music, I've learned many, many, **many**, amazing things!"

Brouwer's music contains many important lessons for Joaquin about technique. From using fingers for preparations and stopping strings, to playing with freedom and intention, it's all contained within Brouwer's compositions.

As a final note about this music, Joaquin urges you to consider how sixteenth notes are often not played *exactly* in time, but with a sense of stylistic freedom that comes from one's own interpretation of the music. This is largely imperceptible without making a recording and slowing it down, but it can strongly define one person's performance. As with any interpretative element, use your own personal taste.

Hopefully this lesson on "El Dacameron Negro" was insightful and provided a helpful perspective on this masterpiece in the guitar repertoire. Best of luck!



RESOURCES



Leo Brouwer's Interview with tonebase

Learn more about Brouwer's life including his experience growing up in Cuba and coming to the United States to study composition at Juilliard.

Sharon Isbin's lesson On Vibrato

As Joaquin mentioned, this piece was written for the American guitarist Sharon Isbin who is also a tonebase artist! Learn about her famous three finger vibrato technique in this lesson.



NOTES



