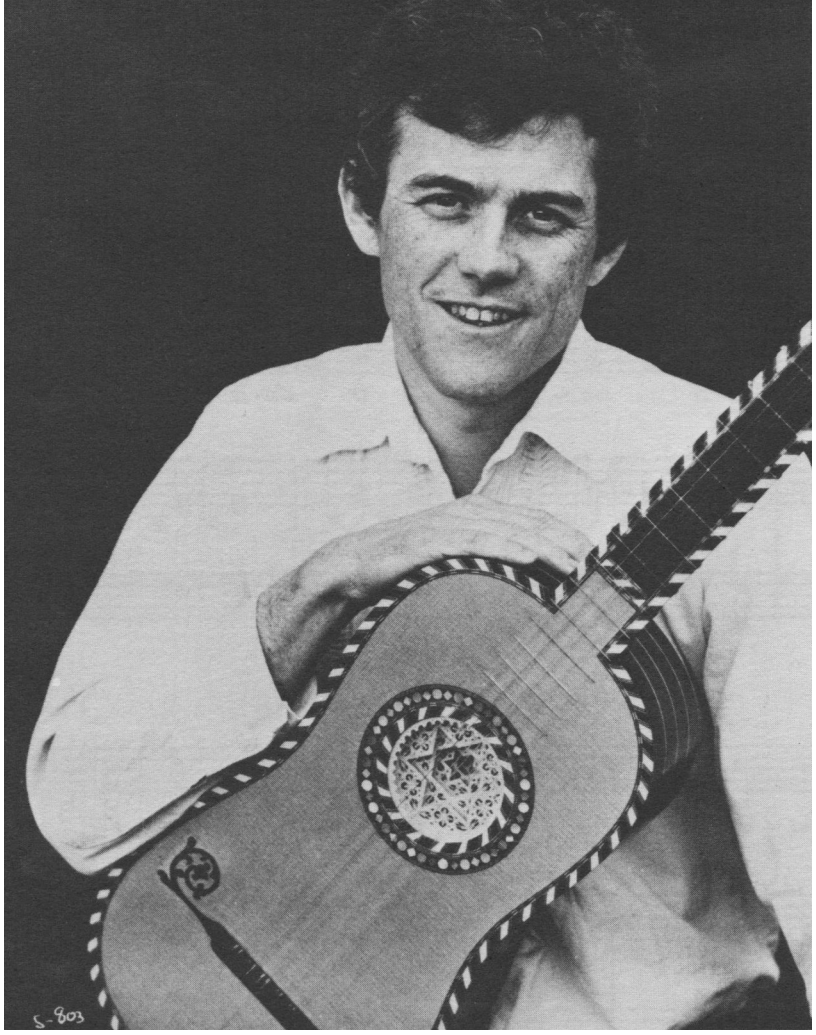
spotlight on



MICHAEL LORIMER

by Cynthia Wiseman

MICHAEL LORIMER is not a musician who limits himself to "playing the guitar" but rather a well-rounded individual who is involved in both the guitar world and the larger world around him. He has been performing for audiences throughout the USA since 1968 in concerts arranged by his former agent the late Sol Hurok and presently by Harold Shaw. In 1975, he was invited to perform in the USSR and is the first American guitarist to tour the Soviet Union. In addition to a demanding concert schedule, Lorimer gives master classes in the USA from coast to coast. He is in demand for experimental programs in arts presentation and was the University of North Carolina Foundation Distinguished Visiting Professor for the academic years 1980–1982. In the television field, PBS has presented a special about him, *The Artistry of Michael Lorimer*, and in publishing, Mel Bay Publications issues a notable series, *The Michael Lorimer Edition*. Lorimer also writes prolifically: an edition is in the making compiling the widely acclaimed classic guitar column he wrote monthly for *Guitar Player* magazine from 1976–1982.

"You have to be in touch with the culture of your own time for your music to have impact," says Michael Lorimer; his own life reflects the truth of his conviction. A series of interviews with Michael Lorimer conducted by *Guitar Review* gives the reader a glimpse into Mr. Lorimer's life. His interests are varied, extending from classic guitar to baroque guitar, from traditional to contemporary music, from meditation to good food. In such a short space, however, we can present only part of the energy that is Michael Lorimer.

MICHAEL LORIMER'S REPERTOIRE

I play music from three areas: the traditional guitar repertoire, new classic guitar music, and baroque guitar music which I perform on an original instrument. The traditional repertoire is for me as vital as ever. Since the late 1960s I've commissioned new guitar music and worked closely with composers. I have also been excited by the music of our modern guitar's predecessor, the baroque guitar.

INTEREST IN THE BAROQUE GUITAR

My interest in the baroque guitar began with my love for baroque music in general and for baroque guitar pieces common to the repertoire of classic guitarists, such as the music we know from Segovia's recordings of De Visée, Sanz,

Roncalli and others. During the 1960s I played those pieces as well as Segovia's arrangements of music by Bach, Couperin, Frescobaldi and others to which I added my own transcriptions of baroque music. I read books on performance practice in the baroque period (which is roughly from 1600 to 1750) and listened to baroque music recordings, among which some of the first to catch my ear were by harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. Studying with Segovia in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, I met Landowska's famous pupil Rafael Puyana and played for him. I admired not only Puyana's feeling for and knowledge of baroque music, but also his awareness of the guitar. For some reason—possibly Puyana's affection for our instrument, possibly his mastery of his own instrument—Puyana clearly knew the guitar better than most guitarists do!

I found that because the harpsichord shares a plucked sound with the guitar but possesses even less dynamic range, sensitive players of the instrument like Puyana not only know baroque music but perceive to a heightened degree important resources of the guitar, rhythm and articulation. At the University of California, Berkeley, I studied with harpsichordist/conductor Alan Curtis and played in the orchestra of his 1964 recording of Claudio Monteverdi's seventeenth-century opera *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (Cambridge Records).

At Curtis' home I met his teacher, one performer who has profoundly affected modern performance of early music, the Dutch harpsichordist/conductor Gustav Leonhardt. I was inspired by Leonhardt's playing and much interested by his approach. To recreate the spirit and vitality of early music, Leonhardt has sought to reproduce not only its original performance practices but the very sound world into which the music first manifested. So that the music might again sound just as it did in its own time, Leonhardt plays on period instruments or exact replicas to duplicate the musical resources then available to the people who composed and performed.

As my conception of baroque music evolved, I arrived at one point where I was happy enough with my performance of classic guitar transcriptions of baroque music but not with the way I played arrangements of pieces for baroque guitar. I felt the way I played Sanz, De Visée, and Roncalli was not in harmony with other baroque music I enjoyed hearing and playing. Something was wrong. Something was missing. First I struggled with the baroque guitar music and then, finding no satisfactory answers, I dropped it from my repertoire.

Shortly thereafter, my friend guitarist/lutenist Robert Strizich provided me with one answer. Since I had first met Robert Strizich in Berkeley in the early 1960s, I was interested in his work as scholar, performer, and composer. In 1969 he transcribed De Visée's complete guitar works (published as volume 15 of François Lesure's "Le Pupitre" collection by Heugel, Paris). As part of that work and as part of his general interest in early plucked string music, Strizich had a baroque guitar made.

The first time I played that guitar I was thrilled. My fingers automatically found ways of playing so that baroque guitar pieces sounded right to my ears for the first time. I heard how the baroque guitar, whose historical relationship to the modern guitar is like that of the harpsichord to the piano, shares with the harpsichord a more nasal, ethereal sound than the warm, rich sound of its modern counterpart. My strums and ornaments had a new crispness and clarity as well as tenderness. The sound of scales and chords had delicacy that complemented the softness that pervades baroque art and is reflected in the very appearance of the baroque guitar itself. I knew I wanted such an instrument.

MY OWN BAROQUE GUITAR

During the next several years I corresponded with dealers of antique instruments and I commissioned baroque guitars from several luthiers. While I enjoyed playing the instruments I collected, I did not find one whose quality approached the classic guitar I played in concert. Each season I decided to leave the baroque guitar home until I found a better instrument. In 1975, Nic van der Waals (v. Teylingenstr. 39, Oudkarspel N.H., Holland) copied a guitar built in Paris in 1682 by the great baroque guitar builder Jean Voboam for Mlle. de Nantes, Duchess of Bourbon, daughter of Louis XIV. Van der Waals' guitar was the concert guitar I sought.

Woods of the baroque guitar are different from those of the classic guitar. The soundboard, however, is the same (spruce), because the resonant qualities of that wood have been prized by luthiers to this day. The sides of the baroque guitar are bent like those on the classic guitar, but on my baroque guitar they are made of ebony, the wood commonly used for classic guitar fretboards. Ebony is hard and, like the rosewood often used for classic guitar sides, it allows the soundboard of the guitar to vibrate without dampening its sound. Pear wood is used in my baroque guitar for the back and bridge. Why pear wood for the bridge? It is my guess that builders of lutes and baroque guitars found pear had just the right density—not too hard and not too soft. Baroque guitar strings are relatively light and the bridge transmits their vibrations to the soundboard—wood denser than pear wood might be too heavy and produce a harsh, brittle sound. On the other hand, a softer wood could dampen the sound and might be cut by the strings tied to it. Other materials used in my baroque guitar are starched parchment paper for its beautiful, lacy rosette, mother-of-pearl in the soundhole inlay, and strips of ebony and bone in the edge purfling.

TUNING FOR THE BAROQUE GUITAR

The baroque guitar has five double courses whereas the classic guitar has six single strings. Baroque guitars were tuned in different ways, depending on the country of origin and the type of music being played. De Visée's tuning for example is a re-entrant tuning, one similar to that of our modern five-string banjo. Rather than have the low-sounding strings on one side of the guitar and the high-sounding strings on the other (the arrangement of the modern guitar), De Visée's guitar has the low-sounding strings in the middle (as illustrated below).

This tuning gives a special quality to chords and invites a special technique for scales. Instead of playing several notes

on one string and then shifting to the next string as we do on the modern guitar, baroque guitarists often played each note of a scale on a different string, which is more like our modern technique for playing *arpeggios* and produces a cascade of sound as each note rings into the next.

Not all baroque guitarists used a re-entrant tuning. One who used a tuning like today's was the great Spanish guitarist Francisco Guerau. His *Poema Harmónico* (Madrid, 1694, published in facsimile by Tecla Editions, Preacher's Court, Charterhouse, London ECIM 6AS) could thus be of particular interest to modern players.

TECHNIQUES OF THE BAROQUE GUITAR

Techniques of the five-course guitar are not as different from those of the six-string guitar as, say, those of a wind instrument compared to those of a plucked instrument, but there are differences, especially in right-hand technique. The attack of the right-hand fingers is much more oblique than it is on the modern guitar. You pluck in a direction much closer to parallel to the strings because in plucking each course you want two strings to sound like one. For the same reason, the rest-stroke as we do it on the classic guitar is not part of baroque guitar technique.

When they plucked the guitar, baroque guitarists often rested their right-hand little finger on the soundboard. This technique is also common to classic guitar playing throughout the nineteenth century, and it survives in a few classic guitar methods published in our century as well as in styles of today's players other than classic guitarists, but it is no longer used by classic guitarists. The height of the bridge on modern guitars, the tension of the strings, and the demands of our repertoire make this technique extremely awkward, and I was completely unfamiliar with it when I first played baroque guitar. While I thought resting the little finger on the baroque guitar might be both technically clumsy and dampening to the instrument's sound, I was interested to try it since seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pictures of guitarists illustrate it over and over. To my surprise, I found the technique not only comfortable but superior to the modern one for projecting the baroque guitar's sound.

The baroque guitar has a different size and shape than the modern guitar and of course it was held differently. Some players leaned the guitar on a table. Others hung it from a button on their coat by means of a loop tied to a string that stretched between buttons at either end of the guitar's back. Seventeenth-century coats weighed 20-30 lbs. and a direct relationship between that weight and the coats' guitar-supporting abilities became clear to me when I tried to hang an instrument from a modern coat and ended up with one coat shoulder near my solar plexus and the other close to my left ear.

I settled on still another seventeenth-century technique, supporting the guitar by means of a strap like the one used by today's country-western players. Like modern strap-using guitarists, guitarists of the past used to stand as well as sit. One picture of Mozart as a small boy pictures him performing in court flanked on one side by a group of musicians among which there is a standing guitarist. I enjoy the freedom I feel playing in that position.

STRINGS FOR BAROQUE GUITAR

Baroque guitarists used gut strings. During their time, gut string making was highly developed and strings were of superb quality. Unfortunately, that is no longer so. Until recently, gut strings used by lutenists and baroque guitarists in our times were made by the same firms that make gut violin strings—violin gut is often lacquered stiff and lute strings should be limp. Recently, with the increase in number of lute players and the interest in historic performance practice, the art of gut string making has improved. Better gut strings are now marketed by the H. E. Wills Division of Technical Medical Industries (1047 West 47th Street, Chicago, IL 60609), E & O Mari Inc. (756 Broadway, Newburgh, NY 12550), and Damian Dlugolecki (850 Amsterdam Avenue, Apt. 16E, New York, NY 10025).

Nevertheless, I use nylon strings because of their superior durability and stability and the demands of my tours. Gut strings are extremely sensitive to climatic changes and in the halls in which I play their sound is little, if at all, different than that of nylon strings. For my classic guitar I use Augustine Red Label strings, but not on the baroque guitar. The tension of ten classic guitar strings on a baroque guitar would rip the top off the instrument. On the baroque guitar I use Pyramid nylon filament in fine gauges (from 45-65 mm.) and one thin wound string for the low D (a Pyramid 1007.5). Pyramid lute strings are made in Germany and distributed in the USA by Donna Curry Music (P.O. Box 194, Topanga, CA 90290).

LEARNING TO PLAY THE BAROQUE GUITAR

I studied baroque guitar with the best teachers—the extant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century methods and music collections. During the early 1970s Robert Strizich and I shared a house where we amassed a substantial library of microfilmed and xeroxed baroque guitar books and manuscripts. Most of our collection is now in the libraries of the University of California, Berkeley, and the Lute Society of America (c/o Beedle White, 17 Edmundson Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450). Baroque guitar music may be obtained from these libraries and also from an enormous number of sources listed in James Tyler's important book *The Early Guitar* (published in 1980 by the Oxford University Press, Ely House, 37 Dover Street, London WIX 4AH).

THE SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GUITAR

The term "baroque guitar" does not refer to one instrument. It points to a jumble of fretted, figure-eight shaped seventeenth- and eighteenth-century instruments from all parts of Europe which used a wide variety of tunings and played a diversity of music. In classifying baroque guitars and music, we do well to draw distinctions musicians of the period would have.

For the most part, the guitar was an ensemble instrument. New styles of music at the beginning of the period we call "baroque" (ca. 1600) featured two voices, bass and treble, and one texture between the voices that was new in conception, harmony. The baroque guitar was perfect for providing harmonic textures and throughout its existence that was its principal use. A guitar's size, shape, tuning, number and

Madame Davis, mezzotint by R. Thomson from a portrait by P. Lely.

Mary Davis, singer and dancer, was a member of Sir William D'Avenant's company, well known in London around 1660, and performed in plays by Shirley, Dryden, and Etherege. She was mistress of Charles II and was frequently mentioned by Pepys as a dancer and court beauty.

material of strings, and manner of being played would be relative to the ensemble in which it was part.

Until the 1630s the guitar was not plucked; it was only strummed, much as the guitar is played today by folk singers. Later the technique of plucking individual notes was added and by the end of the century a refined combination of techniques evolved that we can imagine from some of today's flamenco and Latin American guitar styles and we can see in the solos of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century baroque guitar books.

Two prominent musical styles were identified with the countries of their origin, Italy and France. The Italian style was virtuosic, extroverted, expressive, and disposed to straightforward, vigorous rhythms, drama and contrast. On the other hand, the French style was restrained, graceful, impressionistic and inclined towards intricate rhythms, elegance, balance and subtle nuance. Spain had still another style with its own dances and a partiality to variations, a musical form that first appeared in print in Luis de Narváez' *El Delphín de Música* (1538), a book for vihuela, the six-coursed, guitar-like, Spanish counterpart to the lute.

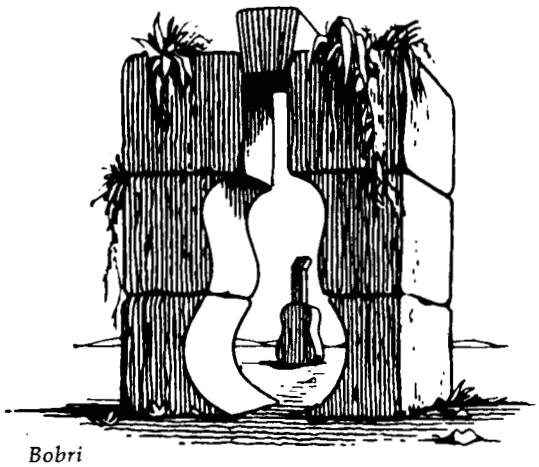
Movement towards an international style began in the late seventeenth century and flowered in the music of eighteenth-century composers like François Couperin and Johann Sebastian Bach. That evolution is alluded to by the last great baroque guitar book, Santiago de Murcia's *Passacalles y Obras* (1732, published in facsimile by Editions Chanterelle, Monaco and distributed in the USA by the Guitar Studio, 1433 Clement Street, San Francisco, CA 94118). De Murcia was guitar tutor to the first wife of Philip V of Spain, Queen María Luisa Gabriela de Savoy. In his eclectic collection of Spanish, French and Italian music, De Murcia includes guitar transcriptions of violin music by the great Italian virtuoso Archangelo Corelli, guitar pieces by Robert de Visée (court guitarist to Philip V's grandfather, Louis XIV of France), and music written more than half a century before by De Visée's teacher, Francisco Corbetta.

Francisco Corbetta was a fascinating man and a look at his life touches on the whole history and spirit of seventeenth-century Europe. His music spans development of the baroque guitar in his native Italy and in France, and he was one of the first masters of the musical styles of both countries. Gambler, guitarist, and courtier, he was confidant and court guitarist to the two greatest monarchs of his age, Louis XIV and Charles II (King of England). The most acclaimed guitarist of the period, Corbetta was sought after as teacher as well as performer. His pupils included professional players as well as a vast number of blue-blooded amateurs including the kings (to each of whom he dedicated a guitar book, both books entitled *La Guitarre Royale*), Mme. la Duchess d'Orleans, the Duke of York (later King James II), and Princess Anne (later Queen). An epitaph written by Rémy Médard, a devoted pupil, appeared in the April 1681 *Mercure galant* and read: ——→

Here lies the Amphion of our day
Francisque that man so rare
Who made the guitar to speak
The true language of Love

He won, with his harmonies
The hearts of prince and king
And some believe a genius
Directed his moving fingers

If, passing by, you hear not his miracles
Know that he never would have died,
That he would have charmed Death himself
But alas, unhappily, Death has no ears.



Bobri

BAROQUE GUITAR REPERTOIRE

On the baroque guitar I play only repertoire written for that instrument: Music by composers I've already mentioned—such as Sanz, De Visée, Guerau and De Murcia—as well as by others like Losy, Campion, Granata, and Roncalli, and, of course, Corbetta. I've enjoyed one gay *Suite in C Major* from Corbetta's most important book, *La Guitarre Royale* (1671). This is the book dedicated to Charles II. For the most part, it consists of French dance suites arranged like those of J. S. Bach, an order that seems to have originated with Corbetta. The C-major suite is unique however: it includes two *chaconnes*, a *gigue* with rhythms unlike others in the book, and a *menuet*. The customary *prélude* I add, transposing it from another suite. The *chaconnes* display the gamut of baroque guitar techniques (including extended strummed passages with remarkable harmonies) and give us a glimpse of how Corbetta sounded when he improvised.

I play from original baroque guitar scores—they are explicit and transcribing or adapting them is unnecessary. So far, the only arrangement I've made was of one François Couperin harpsichord solo that was partially arranged for baroque guitar by an eighteenth-century player. I liked that piece and finished it so that I could play it in concert.

SELECTING CONCERT REPERTOIRE

I plan programs around music that I very much want to play, my strongest love or loves. I enjoy exploring—collaborating with composers on new music, playing baroque guitar, making transcriptions and arrangements, examining in depth the music of one composer, country, historical period, or musical style are some areas into which I have looked.

Thinking of the repertoire on which I want to focus, I imagine the program's drama and how much and what kind of variety I want. Considering keys, moods, tempos, durations, historical and national styles, forms and technical demands of pieces I already know and of pieces I would like to learn, I choose the blocks that build the program—the opener, a piece to precede intermission, music to begin the second half, one brilliant work, one lyrical piece, the ender and encores. One piece may fill several categories. The length and mood of one important work can strongly dictate the shape of a program. For example, a long work with intense emotional impact like some Bach suites or Britten's *Nocturnal* may very well have to precede the intermission or end the concert. Whatever might follow would be anticlimactic.

PRACTICING

When I'm learning new repertoire, I go straight to the parts that have charmed me and drawn me to play the music in the first place—be it a melody, a rhythm, a certain passage, the piece's style or whatever. By working on one section, playing it over and over and assimilating it deep into myself, I often get the key or keys that open the doors to the whole work. I play like this, jumping from one spot to another, until I want to play the whole work together. If I'm short on time, I'll also go right to any difficult passages and isolate techniques that must be learned. This allows time for new skills to simmer and become fully absorbed into my playing. When I tackle troublesome spots, instead of going over and over them, I make a special study of new technique apart from the music. Distilling problems to specific exercises speeds my learning and avoids a mechanical quality that might creep into my playing were I to practice the music for technique.

Rather than memorizing *per se*, I work only towards reading a piece perfectly—making it sound just the way I want it to. Automatically a sound picture and a tactile sense develop, and memorization follows naturally.

Once repertoire has been determined, I play through the entire program, noting what is *good* as well as what could be improved. I strive to pinpoint weaknesses precisely—for example, unsteady rhythms in general or difficulty in one passage in particular. After working on individual spots, I again play through the program and notice how it feels. If the program's energy drops, I go back to find why—lack of my attention, technical problems, poor programming, or whatever—and I address those points as is necessary. Simply defining problems accurately is often their solution.

PERFORMING

Successful concerts require more than the ability to play a program. From preparation through performance, good attitude is essential. I want an audience at my concerts and I want both the listeners and myself to have a good time. Keeping that in mind, I have a philosophy which can be stated in two words—no excuse. If the performance does not

go well, that is the way it goes, and an excuse is not going to satisfy me. During the precious minutes of a concert, statements like "This could have been better if. . . ." are going to be irrelevant.

Good programming and good playing are, of course, essential. But there are issues other than what I play and how I play about which I do what I can since they too affect a performance's impact: the size and presence of an audience (something that is much determined by publicity and promotion), the choice of hall, the use of a shell or other acoustic enhancements, lighting both onstage and in the hall, stage appearance, elimination of noise in the room, air conditioning and ventilation, and notes in printed programs.

The guitar I play, its intonation, the strings on it, the clothes I wear, and how I feel emotionally and physically also bear upon the success of my concert. If attended to, many details are trivial—playing with a well-tuned guitar, for example. I like to keep them trivial.

Finally, performance itself, like playing, takes practice. For me and other artists, no matter how much experience we've had, the first concert after a period of not performing is a shock. I like to play for friends beforehand so that I am warm for that first concert.

AMERICAN GUITAR MUSIC

American music derived from Europe and Africa during the nineteenth century and influences global in scope during our century. At the same time, American music has developed its own character, a vitality that has inspired musicians around the world.

Although people might not instantly associate the classic guitar with America yet, in recent times the United States has been a source of guitar music second to none. Recently, at California State University—Sacramento's marvelous Festival of New American Music—I played an unusual, varied, and fun all-American solo recital. Since the late 1960s I've collaborated with composers and my tie to that recital's repertoire is intimate: with the exception of one two-minute work (written when I was five years old) each selection on the program was written for me.

I opened with C. Curtis Smith's chaconne, *Great American Guitar Solo* (1982). From the pungency of its harmonies to the tang of its rhythms, it is decidedly American. Next, I played William Albright's eight serenades called *Shadows* (1977). This eighteen-minute work combines tight musical control with direct emotional impact. It explores the guitar's capacity for tenderness and intimacy in four serenades, its ability to lead an aggressive dance in three more, and, in one serenade, its gift for humor. The serenades' titles point to *Shadows*' overall design: on the outsides, "Open" and "Close;" then, going towards the center, two with Spanish names, "Tierra" and "Tarantas;" next, "Nights" and "Days;" and, in the center, "Spirits" and "Lullaby."

Color and texture are important elements of all the music on that program but they are superseded by melody, rhythm and harmony in every work but one, Robert Strizich's *Kaleidoscope II* (1971). It is composed of over thirty musical fragments, elements that can be selected and arranged by the performer at the moment of performance. Like a mobile, its form is always new, and like a kaleidoscope, its focus is on a panorama of color.

WORKING WITH COMPOSERS

I meet many composers who are completely foreign to guitar. They often share the opinion Hector Berlioz stated in his famous orchestration treatise that if you can't play the guitar, you can't write well for it. When I collaborate with them, I concisely explain and demonstrate how to write for guitar. I recommend they study Manuel Ponce's *Twenty Variations and Fugue on "Folías"* and idiomatic guitar music such as Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Preludes* and *Etudes*. Using a few guidelines and studying guitar music, non-guitarist composers write beautiful music that well suits our instrument. Sometimes they come up with possibilities that I, a guitarist, would never have thought of.

In two weeks I'll have premiered such a composer's piece at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor—Pulitzer prize-winning composer Leslie Bassett's solo *Five Temperaments*. It's a twelve-minute work in which each movement describes a particular mood, or trait of character—the titles are "Aggressive, energetic," "Poignant, lyrical," "Smooth, yet changing," "Singing, nostalgic" and "Restless." Throughout the work, Bassett's first for guitar, the guitar's sixth string tunes to E♭. This produces a rare tuning (one you may know from Richard Rodney Bennet's third *Impromptu*) whose unique and pungent sonorities have never been explored to the degree they are in *Five Temperaments*. In a program in which all pieces are in usual keys (A, D, E and so forth) Bassett's solo would be a breath of fresh air.

This year many of these new works—music by Albright, Bassett, C. Curtis-Smith, Strizich and others—will appear in the series I edit for Mel Bay Publications.

TREND OF MUSIC TODAY

It is hard to get a perspective of our time since we're right in the middle of it, but, as far as I can see, there is an unusual interest in what is old—unusual because in other cultures, in our own culture in past times, and even now in our pop-music culture, people are most excited by what is new. Maybe that is even the case in contemporary classical music, except there is one odd twist: what's new is what's old.

A synthesis is happening in contemporary composition. The experimentation of the 1960s was wild—anything was called music. Now, because of that, nothing has shock value. Newness for newness' sake is surely *passé*. Composers are now interested in expression itself and are drawing on idioms used throughout our musical history as well as those used in non-western cultures. Today, we hear a return to music that would not have shocked Brahms. I like that. Now, as always, I am happy to see music that is heartfelt and uses language that best expresses composers' feelings. In the 1960s many composers worried about style, about being correct, about being with this latest trend. Now composers ask themselves, "Do I like it? Do people like to listen to it?"

In 1967 Segovia and composer Alexander Tansman were discussing the future of music. Tansman predicted a return to tonal music and Segovia agreed. I had no expectation of seeing that prophecy realized. But, now it is happening. There is a return, but as with any return in music, this one is new and exciting. Because of what has happened in the interim, today's return is certainly not the same as the beginning.