

LEO BROUWER - THE BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS



WORLD PREMIERE

NEWMAN & OLTMAN GUITAR DUO

*El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios /
The Book of Imaginary Beings*
The Music of Leo Brouwer

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World Premiere Recording

Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo
Laura Oltman and Michael Newman, guitars

www.guitarduo.com

From Beatlerianas
Fool on the Hill (1976)
She's Leaving Home (2010)

Leo Brouwer (born 1939)

Música Incidenta Campesina (1978)
Preludio
Interludio
Danza
Final

Leo Brouwer

El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios /
The Book of Imaginary Beings
Duo Concertante (2018)
I. El Unicornio / The Unicorn
II. El Minotauro / The Minotaur
III. Hadas y Gnomos / Fairies and Gnomes
IV. La Gorgona y La Manticora / The Gorgon and the Manticore

Leo Brouwer

Composed La Habana, December 2018
Dedicated to Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo
Commissioned by Raritan River Music
With the generous support of Jeffrey Nissim

Composed in celebration of the 80th Anniversary Year of Leo Brouwer

NOTES IN ENGLISH

CAPTURING THE IMAGINARY BEINGS BY LAURA OLTMAN AND MICHAEL NEWMAN

The guitar explosion in the United States in the 1960s was fueled by the influence of Cuban musicians, including the legendary Leo Brouwer, as well as Juan Mercadal, Elías Barreiro, Mario Abril, and our teachers Alberto Valdes Blain and Luisa Sánchez de Fuentes.

We grew up playing the music of Leo Brouwer. In the early days of the Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo, we shared a booking agent with

Brouwer, Sheldon Soffer Management. We often thought that a major duet by Maestro Brouwer would be a dream for our duo.

We met Brouwer at his New York debut recital in 1978, which was co-sponsored by Americas Society. He was only the second Cuban artist to come to the United States after the revolution, following the dance legend Alicia Alonso. We met again at the Toronto Guitar Festival that summer, but unfortunately, political tension between the U.S. and Cuba caused a cultural gap that lasted decades.

As U.S.-Cuban relations eased in 2014, we became more optimistic that a major new guitar duet by Brouwer could come to be. With help from Americas Society and many other people and groups, we kept pursuing this dream project.

Finally, in 2018, Brouwer was able to accept our invitation and returned to New York City, giving a master class and interview at Mannes School of Music, where the Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo has served as Ensemble in Residence since 1987. We were able to cement our relationship with him and commission this new duet.

Maestro Brouwer chose to write a suite based on a compendium of mythical creatures by the celebrated Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges called *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios – The Book of Imaginary Beings*.

Brouwer completed the piece in Havana in December 2018. We gave premiere performances of it at Raritan River Music Festival, at Americas Society as part of the New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes and Lanciano International Guitar Seminar in Italy, and we invited Brouwer to participate in the 2019 New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes.

We always tell our students that persistence pays. Forty years later, we have come full circle and our dream has become a reality.

As Brouwer explained at his 80th birthday celebration during the New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes, “For a long period, politics were involved. That’s why I came very few times over the years. But now I’m O.K., I have many friends, and I am here!”

This Duo Concertante, as El Libro is subtitled, was dedicated to our duo. It was commissioned by Raritan River Music – a community-based non-profit cultural organization in western New Jersey we cofounded 30 years ago – with the generous support of Jeffrey Nissim, a guitarist and record company executive. It is Brouwer's first composition for an American guitarist in nearly 40 years, since he wrote El Decamerón Negro for Sharon Isbin.

With El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios, international cooperation has once again produced an exceptional work of art, a gift for the entire world to enjoy.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

BEATLERIANAS

The Beatles arrangements on this album, The Fool on the Hill and She's Leaving Home, are the most familiar pieces to most listeners – recognizable but distinctly original interpretations of familiar songs. The Fool on the Hill in particular, features a strong infusion of Afro-Cuban rhythms and lush harmony.

MÚSICA INCIDENTAL CAMPESINA

Música Incidental Campesina, written in 1978, is a series of vignettes inspired by Cuban folk music. It features tonal harmony, complex rhythms and appealing melodies, reminiscent of Brouwer's earliest compositions before he felt the influence of modern European composers while studying abroad. Although Brouwer uses Cuban music as inspiration, he is never simply copying or imitating a particular type of music. The rhythms in these pieces are asymmetrical and frequently vary in meter, more like Stravinsky than like Cuban folkloric music. But Afro-Cuban dance rhythms and devices are recognizable in these pieces, too, including son, montuno, guajira criolla, and zapateo cubano.

EL LIBRO DE LOS SERES IMAGINARIOS

Brouwer says he loves all the monsters in *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios*, the strange and charming book by the Argentine literary giant Jorge Luis Borges that Brouwer chose to set to music. Even dragons, Brouwer says, are full of love and simply embracing everyone with flames.

Though Borges was known for his surreal, philosophical fiction, *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios* is something else: a scholarly but unpretentious guide to mythological creatures from around the globe.

“This is a marvelous book by a genius of the Spanish language – probably the main figure in Spanish literature until his death,” Brouwer says. “Borges is a real great genius in manipulating culturally a language that has such a long, long, long tradition, going back before Cervantes, before Lope de Vega.”

The beings Brouwer chose for this piece – some of the dozens Borges describes in the book – are mostly fearsome, and some of them are monsters. The monsters are partly human, reflecting the reality behind mythology. Imaginary beings and their stories are always metaphorical examples of human realities, offering representations of profound emotional realizations.

Brouwer’s musical depiction of Borges’ text is extremely vivid. He says he does not want to paint a literal picture of these creatures, but more the observer’s reaction to them.

El Unicornio opens with a cascade of notes suggesting the surprise and amazement of coming across this astonishing creature, then dissolves into awe of its magical beauty. The movement uses modal scales and harmonies, giving it the flavor of ancient times when unicorns were thought to be real. “Children are creators naturally,” Brouwer says of this movement. “For them everything could be possible. When you are seven years old the unicorn is not created – it’s there somewhere. It actually exists, and this is so beautiful.” In contemporary culture, a unicorn represents a singularly rare and astonishing experience – something magically beautiful and ephemeral.

Borges' chapter on El Minotauro begins: "The idea of a house built expressly so that people will get lost in it may be stranger than the idea of a man with the head of a bull...it is fitting that at the center of a monstrous house there should live a monstrous inhabitant." This movement has a monstrous repeat scheme reminiscent of being in a labyrinth. Many times, the listener returns to the same place, unable to escape. There is acute urgency in the repetitive 16th-note motives accompanying the melody, evoking the feeling of running in circles to get away from a lumbering, flesh-eating monster.

Hadas y Gnomos contemplates the beautiful and typically feminine fairies, in contrast to the more unattractive and masculine gnomes. Fairies are sometimes depicted as beautiful and benign winged creatures, like dragonflies or fireflies, and gnomes can be just very small and cute men, but in the text of *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios*, both creatures may also be quite malevolent. Brouwer's fairies are certainly beautiful yet also a bit dissonant now and then, with a sinister air of danger. His rambunctious gnomes are full of mischief.

The final movement also combines male and female monsters: *La Manticora*, a flesh-eating jumble of animal parts with the head of a man, and *La Gorgona*, a woman with snakes for hair. Brouwer says of this movement, "Most rare and mysterious are Gorgona and Manticora. They appear in many different ways in different cultures. I placed them to end the suite as an abstraction. You can imagine what you like about these two special creatures."

Both are extremely deadly and Brouwer evokes a sense of the speed and terror of the Manticore as well as its voice, which the text describes as a sound of the union between trumpets and flutes. The Gorgon, in contrast, is said to have created the vast, treeless and infertile deserts of Libya simply by looking around her, because everything she gazes upon turns to stone. The frantic pace of the movement is suddenly interrupted by a serene but unsettling choral section that evokes this stillness and desolation.

El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios is an utterly original piece of music unlike anything else written for guitars. It is quite complex and difficult, not entirely consonant but very easy to understand. It is a completely

Latin American creation whose reference points lie largely outside Latin America. It is sublime and repulsive, frantic and serene, wildly intense and softly intimate.

We are honored to have been able to bring these beings to life in this great work and grateful to have had time with Maestro Brouwer to learn his thoughts and ideas about the piece and its inspiration.

We are sure that Jorge Luis Borges would be delighted with the music as it so effectively captures the spirit of the text of *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios*, while at the same time being a thing completely unto itself.

SPECIAL THANKS

Getting this piece written took several fraught years, including all the friction between the U.S. and Cuba, especially now with the current anti-Latin America administration in Washington. We received help and advice from many sources. Thanks go to the board of trustees of Raritan River Music in New Jersey, which is the non-profit organization that commissioned the work. We also want to especially thank Musicmasters' founder and president Jeffrey Nissim, who funded the commission, as well as the first recording of the work on the Musicmasters label, along with Musicmasters product manager Gregory Barbero. Sebastian Zubieta of Americas Society – our partners at Mannes – was incredibly patient and helpful in getting Brouwer to New York for the premiere. He also was a great advisor on the commissioning process and the shifting legal situation between Cuba and the U.S. His assistants at Americas Society – Gina Portale and Martha Cargo – rounded out the team. Thanks to Cuban expatriates in the U.S. who offered insights – Elias Barreiro, lifelong friend of Leo Brouwer and retired guitar professor at Tulane University; our great friend Rene Izquierdo, guitar professor at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee; and Orlay Alonso, Mannes alumnus and head of Seconda Pratica music publishing company – along with dear New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes friends Mariano Aguirre and David Wolf, who helped bring Brouwer to New York. Thanks to Genevieve Spielberg and Toni Rhatican of GSI Artists for years of support of this project. Thanks to music copyist Ariel Madrigal for preparing the score to the music, and to Isabelle Hernández for organizing Leo Brouwer's visits to New York.

Thanks to producer Anthony Rudel and recording engineer/editing maestro Antonio Oliart at WGBH in Boston.

DEDICATION

For our parents, here and gone.