Vesper
Sean Shibe

VESPER

Thomas Adès (b. 1971)

Forgotten Dances*

1	I. Overture, *Queen of the Spiders*	3. 21
2	II. Berceuse, *The Paradise of Thebes*	3. 55
3	III. Courante – Here was a swift (*for Max Ernst*)	1. 49
4	IV. Barcarolle – The Maiden Voyage	2. 26
5	V. Carillon de Ville (*for Hector Berlioz*)	2. 16
6	VI. Vesper (*for Henry Purcell*)	6. 11

Harrison Birtwistle (1934–2022)

7	**Beyond the White Hand: Construction with Guitar Player****	18. 26
8	**Guitar and White Hand****	1. 54

Thomas Adès

9	**Habanera*** from 'The Exterminating Angel'	2. 55

Harrison Birtwistle

10	**Oockooing Bird***** (Arr. for guitar by Forbes Henderson)	2. 42
11	**Sleep Song***	1. 28
12	**Berceuse de Jeanne***** (Arr. for guitar by Forbes Henderson)	2. 56
13	**Sad Song***** (Arr. for guitar by Forbes Henderson)	2. 27
14	**Je sui aussi***	1. 01

James Dillon (b. 1950)

12 Caprices*

15	1.	0. 28
16	2.	0. 38
17	3.	1. 39
18	4.	0. 35
19	5.	0. 34
20	6.	0. 52
21	7.	0. 44
22	8.	0. 54
23	9.	0. 52
24	10.	1. 10
25	11.	1. 08
26	12.	1. 01

Total playing time: 64. 31

Sean Shibe, guitar

*World premiere recording
**World premiere album recording
***World premiere of arrangements

Sylvette guitar (2021) used on tracks 8 and 10–14.
Simon Ambridge Hauser model used on all other tracks.

Vesper explores the potential of the guitar in the first quarter of the 21st century. Each composer presents a link to Spain in one way or another – often through specific references (for instance to Picasso, Lorca or Buñuel) – but each achieves a startlingly wide range of unique and, often, totally new sonorities.

Dillon describes his ghostly *Caprices* as 'Shivers'. Various hands – white, or severed – appear. So do birds, Oockooing or, in Adès's case, exploding. His *Forgotten Dances* contain almost unbelievable textures, not just explosive but tender, clamorous and heartbreaking. Birtwistle's *Construction*, a titanic and taut work, is counterweighted by several mesmerising miniatures. Three of these are original, written for his son Silas, and another three are arranged for the guitar by a friend of Silas's, Forbes Henderson. It was Forbes who introduced me to the luthier Simon Ambridge – by Julian Bream's estimation, the best Hauser-style guitar maker – whose instruments I play on this album. *Sylvette*, Ambridge's Torres-model guitar illustrated by a muse of Picasso, which I perform the miniatures on, is literally a central plank of this album-manifesto:
Spanish but British; contemporary; ancient.

All of the repertoire is recorded here for the first time.

Sean Shibe

Working with Alloys

Igor Stravinsky sits in an auditorium in Toronto, in a break between recording sessions of his *Symphony of Psalms*. An English man approaches him, clearly on his best behaviour. It's Julian Bream; he introduces himself, establishes some common ground, then sets about impressing him. 'Would you like to see a lute?' Bream asks Stravinsky. 'Would you like to see *my* lute?'

It's a fascinating, intensely awkward scene, as the exceedingly keen Bream plays 'Flow My Tears' for a distinctly unbothered Stravinsky. Unfortunately for Bream, his attempts to entice Stravinsky don't work. Stravinsky never writes for Bream, either on lute or guitar.

In an interview with *Gramophone*, Bream would later describe this as the most embarrassing moment of his career; for he was not accustomed to receiving rejections from composers. A great instigator of the creation of a modern guitar repertoire, the canon of guitar works to pass through Bream's hands features a near A–Z of 20th century composing talent: Arnold, Bennett, Birtwistle, Britten, Davies, Henze, Searle, Takemitsu, Tippett and Walton – all created bespoke works for the guitar, channelled through Bream.

But Bream's proficiency in engaging composers to write for his instruments doesn't tell the full story. 'He had a reputation for blowing very hot and cold with people,' says Jonathan Leathwood, a guitarist and academic who worked with Bream around the establishment of the Bream Trust, the group which continued Bream's commissioning work following his retirement. And Silas Birtwistle, son of Harrison, saw this volatile trait firsthand.

The guitar was not an instrument that Birtwistle senior was naturally drawn to, but he wrote Silas a short piece called *Guitar and White Hand*, and also arranged hockets by Guillaume de Machaut for guitar ensemble. Later, following Bream's retirement, Birtwistle eventually accepted Bream's request for a piece through the Trust. By this point, Birtwistle, having been drawn towards the work of Picasso – an artist for whom the guitar was an essential symbol – had decided to call the work *Construction with Guitar Player* (after a posthumously discovered cardboard construction), and not something more poetic like *Beyond the White Hand*, relating to his previous work. When Birtwistle informed Bream of the change at an 80th-birthday celebration in his Wiltshire home, Bream flipped at this 'awful' new title. 'He could fly off the handle,' Silas says. And, when the composer wouldn't immediately back down, Bream promptly told the Birtwistles where to go. (The eventual title satisfied both parties.)

Perhaps this volatility was because of Bream's previous expectations, as, in other settings, he played an unusually involved role in many stages of the compositional process. Unlike other commonly available instruments, the guitar usually requires performers to be extremely interventionist when working with composers. All performers of new music want pieces that are playable; most require new writing to be idiomatic, well written for their instruments. But there's something about the guitar – with its idiosyncrasies of fingering, hand-placement, and resonances – that makes it particularly challenging for composers who can't play the instrument to get it right the first time.

So, the story of the creation of a repertoire in the 20th century is also the story of two ambitious, involved guitarists whose personalities are forever encoded in that repertoire. 'The two great editors,' Leathwood says, 'are Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream.'

Segovia, a similarly influential force in creating a new dedicated repertoire for the guitar, regularly intervened far beyond what is orthodox in the compositional process. Take Federico Mompou's *Suite compostelana* for guitar, composed in 1962 for Segovia, which is unexpectedly shorter in the Segovia version; consulting the manuscript, there are passages which are lightly crossed out. Segovia's close – and at times tetchy – collaboration with Heitor Villa-Lobos, particularly around his 12 Etudes, has created a maze of questions for scholars and performers trying to find a clear route through manuscripts. (It's a task which brings up many existential queries: Where is authenticity located in a collaboratively produced score? What is the truest essence of the work? Is a single truth even possible?) 'There are some passages of Segovia commissions where it's not very clear where extra passages even came from,' Leathwood says.

Bream, too, would be unusually involved in structural elements of pieces. In an article in *Vortex Music Journal*, Leathwood interviewed the composer Richard Rodney Bennett about working with Bream. 'I was scared of him,' Bennett said. Bream thought of adding extra flourishing arpeggios at the end of the cadenza of his concerto. Bennett declined – 'but he did it anyway.' Bream reordered passages in Michael Tippett's *Blue Guitar* without the composer's permission and told Roberto Gerhard that a piece he submitted was 'all strumming'. 'He never lacked confidence to tell a musician what he thought,' Leathwood writes.

Bream was an intimidating figure, partly because of his stature as a guitarist, partly because of his brazenness, but also because he was a bit of an unknown quantity. 'He had a high view of himself and his opinions,' says Andrey Lebedev, a guitarist who worked closely with Bream, 'partly because he had to fight through lots of things. He hasn't followed the crowd.' Born in Battersea in 1933, Bream was unable to study guitar at the Royal College of Music – there was nobody there to teach him – and so studied privately while playing piano and cello in the college environment. From there, he mostly developed his guitar and lute technique on his own.

Bream stood happily outside of what he saw as the established order. 'He proudly proclaimed that he had never, ever played at a guitar festival,' Leathwood says. He never taught at an institution, was sceptical of academia, and rarely taught privately. 'He saw himself moving very much in the mainstream of classical music and quite apart from the guitar world.' This won him fans in far-flung places – a deep admiration in Brazil, for example – and the attitude suited someone who was a proselytiser for the guitar. 'He had a very strong intuitive sense of how pieces work in human terms,' Leathwood adds.

The warring parts of his personality had consequences for guitarists. 'Because he had to do everything himself, he also had a real loathing of anything that kind of smelled institutional,' Lebedev says. Lebedev sees Bream in the same mould as John Williams – both were highly individual guitarists whose movement outside of systems and institutions ultimately meant that they left no protégés to continue their legacy directly.

Later in life, Bream's strong intuition – and steadfast belief in it – made things complicated for those in his orbit. He had always been inconsistent when it came to working with others, especially students – fingerings changed from week to week, as did notes on interpretation. (Perhaps this is understandable for someone who existed almost entirely outside of conventional teaching.) As he got older, this trait presented itself more acerbically. Stridency dashed by forgetfulness made him demand pieces be programmed that

would change, unannounced, months down the line. A memoir, co-written with a writer and a key objective for Bream post-retirement, was scrapped. People would fall out of his circle for minor, seemingly inconsequential reasons.

For Leathwood, these characteristics crystallised in the lead-up to a large, extremely ambitious concert he'd undertaken for the Bream Trust. Leathwood had, over time, developed a trapped nerve in his elbow; after surgery, he eventually found himself unable to play to his usual high standard. When Leathwood broke the news to Bream that he wasn't able to do the concert – including the premiere of the new Birtwistle commission – Bream replied sadly, saying 'I just wish you'd just told me that you had an issue.' Leathwood pushed back; he'd called after the surgery. 'No, you didn't,' Bream replied firmly. Unlike others who fell out with Bream, the correspondences remained friendly, but Bream's actions became more unpredictable.

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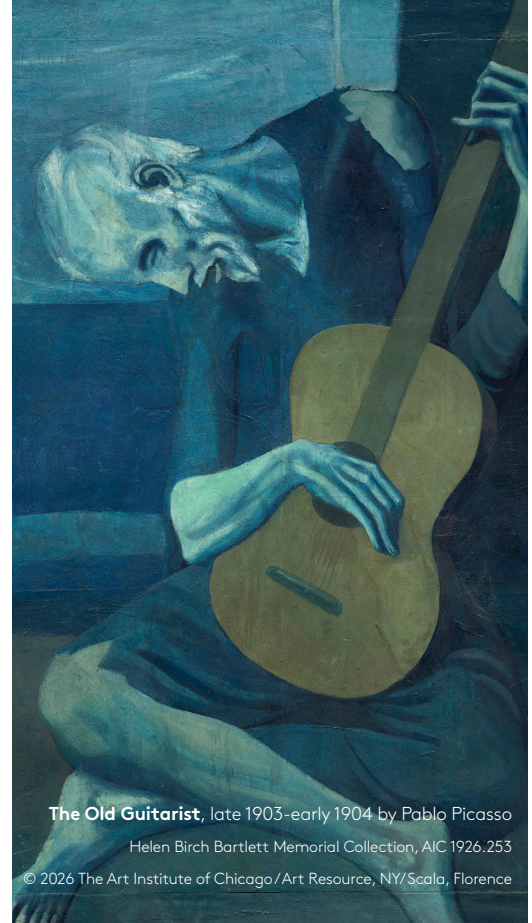
The idea of the autonomous musical work – one that stands aloof from today, impervious to trends or logistics, and in service only of itself and posterity – has always been a myth. To approach a Bream commission today, one has to swim through layers of mediation which, for ease, we assume to be neutral. History believes in a frictionless process from idea to utterance, wheels greased by a succession of performers, publishers, recordings, programmers, interpreters, audiences and emotions, all automatically assumed to be straightforward and uncomplicated. If the stories of these scores – and of Bream – tell us one thing, it's that these works are alloyed, not pure – and all the stronger for it.

Hugh Morris

Out of all the composers who are known for writing music on a large scale – symphonic, operatic, choral, and so on – it is very unusual for any of them to play the guitar. One rare exception is Hector Berlioz, who reportedly played the guitar and nothing else. And yet when Berlioz came to the instrument in his treatise on orchestration, his advice was not encouraging: 'It is almost impossible to write for the guitar unless one is a player oneself. Yet most composers who use it are far from familiar with it and write things of unnecessary difficulty with no sonority or effect.' That was in 1843; over the past century, however, most significant modern guitar works have come from composers who do not themselves play the instrument. By reimagining the guitar's idioms and sound world, these composers have profoundly influenced the development of guitar technique and musicianship.

This collection of works by three non-guitarists, Harrison Birtwistle (1934–2022), James Dillon (b. 1950) and Thomas Adès (b. 1971), all very recently written and recorded here for the first time, proves that the guitar's wealth of sonorous and harmonic resources can be adapted to fundamentally different expressive ends. In Berlioz's time, the guitar was everywhere – in the salons, in the parlours, on the streets – yet nowhere in the mainstream repertoire. It was always an instrument of evocation, the ideal instrument to accompany the amateur singer: in Spain, for example, it was associated with songs, stories and prayer, while in Britain it was associated with romance, moonlight and the warm South. Today, no matter who writes for it, their language sounds somehow transformed on the guitar, reminding us of Wallace Stevens's famous lines, 'Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar.' The composers on this album confront the guitar in uniquely personal ways, making it sound allusive (Adès), ritualistic (Birtwistle) or elemental (Dillon).



The Old Guitarist, late 1903-early 1904 by Pablo Picasso

Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, AIC 1926.253

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Thomas Adès, *Forgotten Dances* (2023)

In 2022, when asked by the *Guardian* newspaper why he composed, Thomas Adès replied, 'I have no choice. There is an image in my head which to me is completely real. There are obstacles in my way, dense solid knots, like ganglia … By undoing these knots, I release a living thing.' Any guitarist playing through *Forgotten Dances* will surely be struck immediately by how uncompromisingly Adès writes for the instrument: under the fingers, one feels both the knots, as he embraces musical ideas that test the guitar's limits, and the living thing – the expression that is unleashed as the knots come undone.

Throughout the suite's six movements, Adès commits to a vision of the guitar as an instrument of illusion. Often he goes back to the 16th-century lute, whose players found a way to make its plucked, fast-decaying sounds evoke a choir: just listen to the intertwining melodies of 'Vesper'.

At other times, he asks for chords that seem too opaque for only six strings, as at the end of 'Carillon de Ville'. The Courante gives the impression of two guitarists playing, while clever use of high harmonics in the slow Berceuse and Barcarolle allow him to write melodies that go beyond the instrument's usual range; the Overture even overshoots the guitar's fingerboard, deliberately exploiting the delicate, percussive sounds to be found there. But Adès also goes into the guitar's secrets, exploring its extraordinary capacity for intimacy, creating miniature sound worlds full of slides, shades of vibrato, rolled chords, sonorities dark and bright, muffled attacks, tremolandos and trills.

Each movement asks not only what the guitar might do but what it is. When I wrote to Adès to ask how he came to the image of the spider for the opening Overture, he responded that for him, the guitar is 'particularly like a spider's web, in texture and essence'. In the same message, he said that the movements of the swift, depicted in the Courante, seemed right to him for the guitar because 'they are such fierce little bundles of feather and bone'. For the Carillon, he imagined the fragile instrument producing the vastest music imaginable.

The suite's titles are associative yet elusive. Adès usually tells us what kind of music we are listening to (such as an overture or courante) and provides an image (a spider, a swift). But sometimes he mixes in personal associations or refers to music and art that has stimulated him. Always, though, it is enough for the listener to know that this is music that reaches outside of itself, inviting listeners to explore their imagination and their own cultural store. After all, these are 'forgotten' dances: the titles, perhaps, are just vague enough to invite the listener to fill in the gaps.

Take the first movement, 'Overture, *Queen of the Spiders*', which fuses two images: the majestic overture that begins many a Baroque suite and the spider in her web. Perhaps, when Adès imagined the guitar as a web, he was thinking partly of its fingerboard, with its frets criss-crossed by strings that, historically, were made of organic materials (gut and silk). The opening chord, consisting mostly of the guitar's open strings, is made up of perfect fourths; the web quivers, as groups of notes slide to the frets above or below; sometimes they dart up and down the fingerboard as the spider seeks its prey. Note especially the sudden dart at 1:13 on the track – 'fatal for the fly!', in the composer's words. Already in this movement, the Elizabethan lute makes an appearance: from time to time, the stacks of fourths resolve into traditional chords, enlivened by scraps of counterpoint.

The second dance, 'Berceuse, *The Paradise of Thebes*', alludes to Luis Buñuel's 1962

film *The Exterminating Angel*, on which Adès based his 2016 opera of the same title. Although this movement uses similar compositional techniques to the opera, it does not quote any of its music – indeed, it refers to a scene in the film that never made it into the opera. One of the characters reveals to another a cache of opiates he keeps hidden in the drawing room, stored in a little box: 'We used to call this room,' he tells his friend, 'our "Theban paradise". We'd gather some friends once in a while and spend a few unforgettable hours.' This cradle song, slyly marked 'time morphable' on the score, rocks in a slow but unstable two; the melody is blurry with slides, tremolandos and trills. The guitar has transformed itself from a spider's web to a box of narcotics.

A 1927 painting by the surrealist Max Ernst, *Ci-fut une hirondelle* (Here was a swallow), provides an association for the third movement, 'Courante – Here was a swift (*for Max Ernst*)'. As for the courante, it was one of the core dances of the Baroque suite: its title literally means 'running', and so Ernst's swallow is replaced by a bird that is, literally, swifter – a bird that is almost always airborne.

The title of the fourth dance, 'Barcarolle – *The Maiden Voyage*', has personal associations for the composer: 'My paternal grandmother, Sally Adès,' he explains, 'travelled from Southampton to New York on the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary in 1936, aged fifteen. After she passed on we found a photograph of her and her father dining at the captain's table. I had visited the ship in Long Beach, California, and seen the fine Art Deco doors behind her in the photograph. As it happens, I'd kept some music manuscript paper belonging to her on which she'd made some notations as a child, and this was the paper on which I wrote the music that became "The Maiden Voyage".'

The romantic revolutionary Berlioz is supposed to have played only the guitar (as noted above) and even to have used it to compose. Adès's homage to him, 'Carillon de Ville (*for Hector Berlioz*)', starts naively and tunefully with the guitar's characteristic bell sounds or harmonics. As the piece progresses, the texture becomes ever deeper and more clangorous, drawing out of the instrument a complex, microtonal resonance, reminiscent perhaps of the bells at the end of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Recounting his process, Adès draws these strands together: 'When I was in Paris in 2023 to conduct my *Dante* ballets at the Opéra Garnier, I lived in the Rue du Conservatoire, next to the former Conservatoire, in whose theatre, still beautifully preserved, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* was premiered. The church next door had an unusually elaborate carillon, which became the theme of this movement. It fitted satisfyingly the harmonics of the guitar, but maybe something about the proximity of the birthplace of Berlioz's seismic work pushed my treatment of this theme to an extreme.'

Many Baroque suites are rounded off by a passacaglia or chaconne – a continuous piece on a bass pattern or ground that can be repeated as many times as the composer needs, allowing space for emotion to accumulate, by turns hushed or rapturous. For 'Vesper', the last movement of this suite, Adès takes as his starting point a ground from one of Purcell's most affecting songs, *Evening Hymn*, on a text by Bishop William Fuller, in which the poet asks God to cradle his soul as he sleeps. Adès had previously arranged Purcell's song for voice and piano, adding in only the lightest of personal touches. This guitar version, however, is no arrangement: Purcell's ground bass becomes an updated, more chromatic version over which Adès weaves his own counterpoint, constantly alluding to Purcell's curving lines with their tenderly expressive embellishments.

At 1:36, there is an echo of Purcell's final 'Hallelujah'; it comes back more clearly at 4:08. The ending, with its combination of melodies converging to a climax, depends on an illusion: the guitarist has to let go of notes shortly after they are sounded, but the listener imagines that they sustain, creating the impression not of a guitar but of a choir and harp, as though to evoke the words of Fuller in the Purcell song: 'Then to thy rest, O my soul!/And singing, praise the mercy/That prolongs thy days.'

Thomas Adès, *Habanera* (2016)

That most northern of British composers, Peter Maxwell Davies, once commented on how difficult it is to write for the guitar without sounding Spanish. In *Forgotten Dances*, Adès manages it effortlessly, replacing the perennial image of the flamenco guitar with the Elizabethan lute. Sometimes, in his score, underneath a particularly soft and resonant chord, he writes 'lute' as an indication to get a warm and dark colour. In *Habanera*, the flamenco instrument takes the stage. The habanera rhythm is stylized and exaggerated and the guitar is treated percussively, with taps (like castanets), sweeps, strums, mandolin-like tremolandos and trills, clipped single notes and abrupt changes of timbre.

In short, this is a surrealist habanera, and it originates in a surreal scene. The entire piece is an excerpt from Adès's opera 'The Exterminating Angel' (mentioned above as a source for 'The Paradise of Thebes'), where the guitar accompanies a mezzo-soprano. In the opera (as in the film on which it is based), it is the middle of the night and one of the characters, Leonora, sick and delirious and surrounded by bodies – some alive, some dead – sees a severed hand floating around the room.
It is the quintessential operatic mad scene: the guitar plays the habanera (the dance of the severed hand?) and over it, she sings her delirium out loud: 'I think that if a son were born to me he would remain

eternally watching the beasts copulating in the late afternoon!' This stand-alone habanera is almost identical to the guitar part in the opera, with the voice simply removed. It was Adès who realized that this was possible and collaborated on the solo version with Sean Shibe.

Harrison Birtwistle, *Beyond the White Hand: Construction with Guitar Player* (2014) and Other Pieces for Guitar

'You can really hear the false relations,' said Harrison Birtwistle, part in wonder, part in relief, as he heard his new composition for guitar *Beyond the White Hand* for the first time. The passage that elicited this reaction came toward the end of the piece (it begins at 14:47 in Sean Shibe's recording); that first hearing took place in the composer's large drawing room, and I was the guitarist. When he requested these notes, Sean asked me to include some personal remarks about my experience working with Birtwistle.

After I had played the piece for him, we drove to the house of Julian Bream, a good friend of Birtwistle's and of course a legend of the guitar. It was Bream who had commissioned the new work through the charitable trust that bears his name. There we went through everything again, with Bream offering suggestions for making the music more idiomatic for the instrument. Birtwistle accepted some of these suggestions and rejected others. If he liked a suggestion it was because it made the piece 'more like itself' and because the resulting sound was 'grungy'– a word that seemed to baffle Bream.

Birtwistle especially liked suggestions for idiomatic guitar effects that he had not quite known how to incorporate himself. In one little episode, for example (from 7:25 to 8:07), three chords are played by striking the strings like a drum; the chords repeat, but now plucked normally and with a little counterpoint added; repeated a third time, the gesture develops further,

now with the melody in harmonics: the guitar effects – the drumming and the harmonics – were suggested by Bream and eagerly accepted by the composer. As with all collaborations, the process was messy – time-limited and contingent on who was there and what ideas occurred to them. Birtwistle even forgot to bring his glasses to Bream's house and so could not check his own score. He relied on his ear.

What, then, did Birtwistle mean when he spoke of hearing false relations? If we are to avoid a technical definition, a false relation is what you experience when notes seem to point in contradictory directions. The result is a frisson of dissonance (often agreeably sour) – but not atonality. On the contrary, a false relation can only be experienced in a tonal context – British composers of the twentieth century took the resource from their Elizabethan predecessors. So although he often carries dissonance to an extreme in his music, in composing *Beyond the White Hand*, Birtwistle always heard echoes of traditional harmony and wanted the listener to hear them as well. For the general listener looking for a way into his sound world, this piece might offer an interesting entry point, because when a composer has a highly individual approach to harmony, the guitar has a way of giving it particular distinction – perhaps because of its uneven resonance.

Bream asked for fifteen minutes of music, which is unusually long for a guitar piece (unless it is divided into movements, as in *Forgotten Dances*). He got more; yet at the outset, Birtwistle was uncomfortable with writing a lengthy concert work for the guitar. He needn't have been: when he delivered his first draft manuscript, everything was already completely playable. His approach to the guitar is starkly different to that of Thomas Adès. We noted above that Adès relies on the guitar's ability to imply things, writing notes that cannot ring for their full

duration and drawing on all the guitar's resources to cover a wide range of pitch. Birtwistle's writing, by contrast, is spare and literal: everything is mapped precisely onto the strings and fingerboard and rings exactly as written. The lower registers are exploited for abrasive harmonies, and when higher notes are added, there is often no middle to the texture. This results in a hollow sort of sonority, suggestive of bleakly evocative landscapes. When the guitar finally climbs to its highest register and lingers there (9:40), it is a major event.

When Birtwistle finally accepted the commission from Bream (it had been talked about literally for decades), he was not entirely unfamiliar with the instrument. His son, Silas, plays the guitar, and in 2007, Birtwistle had surprised him with a short guitar solo: *Guitar and White Hand*, named after a Picasso painting from 1927. This miniature, not originally intended for publication, now provided a starting point for the Bream commission: snatches of it are heard at the beginning, and it is played in full at the end. And of course it provides the first part of the title, *Beyond the White Hand*.

Guitar. Paris, October-December 1912 by Pablo Picasso.
Gift of the artist, Moma NY Acc. no.: 640.1973
© 2026 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/ Scala, Florence

Despite this experience, some discomfort with the guitar remained, and as he considered what else to do in the piece, Birtwistle confronted it by again looking at the instrument through the eyes of Picasso. He found inspiration in a recently published book that catalogued all of Picasso's guitar sculptures and paintings from the pathbreaking years of 1912–14 (Anne Umland, *Picasso Guitars, 1912–1914*, MoMA, 2011). Among Picasso's experiments from this period, Birtwistle was particularly attracted to a preliminary sketch for a painting in which the guitar is broken into different sections, cubist style, each to be painted with its own colour (the sketch was in black and white and apparently never realised in colour; this guitar piece could be thought of as that realisation). As for *Construction with Guitar Player*, which provided Birtwistle with the second part of his title, it is a photograph of an installation showing a line drawing of a guitar player (again in cubist style), with arms of newspaper coming out of the wall to embrace a real guitar over a real table, on which is placed a wine bottle and other objects.

This strange mixture of two and three dimensions informs Birtwistle's own *Construction*, made a hundred years after Picasso's. It was originally sketched as a series of miniatures, composed in no definite order; only later did they fuse into a continuous whole. Each episode features Birtwistle's characteristic inventions: wandering melodies (often shared between two registers, as at the beginning), infectious yet deceptive rhythms (8:43), hockets (12:26) and irregular ostinatos (15:09). As one becomes familiar with the piece, it is helpful to listen for the moments when one process ends and another begins. Many of the episodes have a strong identity that makes it easy to imagine they could have been composed separately. To give a typical example, one passage (3:22) begins with an explosive chord that launches a melodic

line that descends and decays; the gesture repeats four times, each time starting lower and quieter, and each time decaying in a new way, as though each repetition was an imperfect echo of the one before. The chord that begins the fourth and last repetition is immediately recalled at the beginning of the next episode (4:07).

There is also a sense of a larger plan. The ruminative first part is preoccupied with melody and landscape. Then (around 5:55) percussive taps on the body of the guitar usher in Birtwistle's characteristically bumpy 'clock' music, with its uneven ticks and irregular repetitions. After this section has peaked and given way to fragmentary looping dialogues (10:22), another energetic process begins (11:58), still drier and more intense than the previous one. Soon it transitions into sections of sonorous, tolling ostinatos (around 14:10). Finally comes a complete statement of *Guitar and White Hand* (16:03). As it unfolds – a sort of apotheosis, punctuated by aftershocks of all that has come before – we realise that its austere sonorities have given the entire work its signature.

And thus back to the grunge – the gruff, bare resonances that have perhaps not been heard on the guitar before, certainly not to this extent. These resonances give the piece its own unique psychological space – that ritualistic, pagan quality that keeps one hooked on Birtwistle's music and that one cannot find anywhere else. It is not for nothing that he reached compositional maturity in that period of British culture that produced the genre of folk horror; his looping constructions reach back to Picasso's cubism but forward to the 'hauntology' of British folk, with its samples, its loops and its fascination with the soundscape of post-war British culture.

Beyond the White Hand and *Guitar and White Hand* are Birtwistle's only 'official' guitar solos. They are here supplemented with five more miniatures to make an

imaginary 'collected works' for guitar. Two, along with *Guitar and White Hand*, were gifts for Silas. *Sleep Song*, written when Silas was around ten years old, is marked to be played 'softly moving'. Its folk-like melody unfolds over an eighth-note bass ostinato. *Je sui aussi* (I too am as one smitten) dates from about thirty years later, when Silas had resumed playing the guitar after a long break and joined a local guitar quartet. He only reluctantly mentioned to his ensemble partners that his father was a composer. Then 'out of the blue' (in Silas's words), Birtwistle handed him a little piece – an arrangement of a ballade by the 14th-century composer Guillaume de Machaut – somewhat to the bemusement of the other guitarists.

And no wonder: in *Je sui aussi*, Birtwistle has taken the first part of the original song and imposed Machaut's own techniques on it to the point of deliberate distortion. He has added a fourth voice to Machaut's original three to create the most unlikely dissonances. Then he has chopped up the four parts and made them zigzag through the ensemble. Short as this piece is, it tells us a little about Birtwistle's quirky way of adapting and exaggerating medieval techniques to suit his expressive ends. It might be listened to alongside the same composer's more extensive reworking of Machaut for orchestra, Machaut à ma manière.

The remaining three miniatures, *Berceuse de Jeanne*, *Sad Song* and *Oockooing Bird*, started life as piano pieces and are heard here in transcriptions by Forbes Henderson. They open tiny windows into Birtwistle's peculiar musical mind, providing between them examples of irregular ostinato accompaniments, rotating snatches of melody, false relations and enigmatic expressivity. Berceuse de Jeanne ironically affects to be a real lullaby: it is marked to be played at 'tempo of baby's heart' and gone through twice, with the last phrase repeated ad libitum. Over the last chord,

Birtwistle writes: 'Hold until baby awakes. Then start the piece again.' *Oockooing Bird* also has a text: 'Once I saw an Oockooing bird / so white / o God so white.' There is of course no such bird; the music has a distant, unsettling quality that is instantly recognisable as Birtwistle, though he was only sixteen when he wrote it – *Oockooing Bird* is his earliest acknowledged score.

Sean Shibe's recordings of these miniatures provide yet another connection with Picasso, performed as they are on a unique guitar – *Sylvette* (2021), made by the luthier Simon Ambridge in collaboration with the French-British artist Lydia Corbett. Corbett (born Sylvette David) met Picasso at the age of nineteen and became his model and muse, the subject of some sixty paintings, drawings and sculptures. The guitar itself is inspired by the instruments of the Andalusian luthier Antonio de Torres (1817–1892), often thought of as the first recognisably modern classical guitars – small-bodied, slender, vibrant and extraordinarily responsive to the touch of the player. The light-coloured woods of the guitar's body, made of aged spruce and cypress, serve as a canvas for Corbett's free-flowing imagination. On the back is a depiction of the famous 'girl with the ponytail' – Sylvette herself, at the age she met Picasso. The front and sides depict happy lovers, blue skies, and themes of nature.

James Dillon, 12 Caprices (2025)

When non-guitarists – composers used to writing large-scale works for large forces – write for the guitar, the resulting music often shows a deep preoccupation with what kind of thing the instrument can say, wrestling with the guitar's natural affinity for folk music and song. We have seen that Adès connects the guitar with a store of shared cultural references, while Birtwistle encloses it in a ritualistic world. James Dillon approaches the guitar in yet another way: one might call it research, using the guitar to investigate the fundamental elements of music, how it sounds and how it communicates. When I asked him how he came to compose his 12 Caprices, he spoke of the guitar as a challenge: 'the question is always one of resonance for me, that relationship between the structure of the instrument, its tuning and expression'.

Dillon's own prefatory note to the Caprices, epigrammatic and elliptical, is well suited in style to the music it precedes. There is a reference to a trip not taken, to the guitar itself as something elusive and to an early fragmentary poem by Lorca, a *Capricho*:

> To talk about miniatures, is to talk of glimpses, a framing of the fugitive, written in a few days at end of March 25, an apology for not arriving in Andalusia perhaps; gestures from a cubist Lorca perhaps, prefaced as they are by Lorca's *Capriccio*, after all –
>
> *In the moon's web,*
> *the sky spider,*
> *stars are entangled,*
> *whirling*.
> Federico García Lorca
>
> Fleeting images of an idea; of a form; of an uncertainty, an instrument fugitive, perhaps.
> Dedicated to the American poet Dan Albertson
> * *caprice* from the Italian capriccio 'a shivering'

[Lorca's Spanish original reads: 'En la red de la luna, / araña del cielo, / se enredan las estrellas / revoladoras.' The poem is one of a little group of miniatures called *Estampas del mar* (Engravings or woodcuts from the sea) and absent from many collections of Lorca's works.]

In music, historically, a typical caprice has an immediately striking character (think of those by Paganini for solo violin), and when Shibe played these pieces for Dillon, the composer laid some importance on finding it: the first Caprice, for example, should be played with 'genuine nervousness', while the seventh should be nonchalant and carefree. But these pieces are about more than character: each movement gives a sense of looking at a painting whose surface has been partially scraped away, drawing one's attention partly away from the image to the physical materials it is made up of. Listening to Dillon's handling of the guitar, one is always aware of his close attention to the building blocks of the instrument's sound, with the expressive characters acting almost as a pretext for this deeper inquiry. Simple opposites emerge: chords arpeggiated or plucked together; short, sharp attacks versus tremolandos; dark sounds versus bright; single-note flurries versus sustained intervals; partitioned textures versus sensuous chords; and so on. Each Caprice finds part of its meaning through its relationship to the whole. When answering my questions about the cycle, Dillon mentioned that often the composition of one led spontaneously to the next, although he did not finalise their order until he had completed all twelve.

Dillon's background and interests appear, from the outside, so eclectic that it is hard to contextualise this collection of miniatures. His early musical experiences came through playing in Scottish pipe bands and later on as a teenager in a band playing blues-based garage music, something he abandoned by his late-teens. Moving to London in 1970 he studied Indian

music with Punita Gupta, herself a student of Ravi Shankar, however his formal studies were devoted less to music than to topics that can stimulate fresh thinking about the fundamentals of music: acoustics and linguistics. His only other solo guitar piece, *Shrouded Mirrors*, was written as long ago as 1988: it is a study in temporal flow, notated with intricate rhythms of the sort that led him to be categorised as a 'new complexity' composer. Certain Caprices show some of that intricacy but here set in relationship with other compositional approaches. The opening Caprice, for example, with its pointillistic treatment of attacks and dynamics, acts as a kind of search for material, setting out the guitar's palette of sounds. In the third Caprice, the upper voice starts with flurries of notes that contain microscopic rhythmic inflections, but underneath is a layer of quiet slow-moving dyads that seem to tame the flurries, which get gradually quieter and then simpler. The ninth Caprice brings back elements of the first as an interlude, referring back to the starting point before starting the journey to the warm resonances of the twelfth.

By the time Dillon came to write these pieces, he had spent many years working with large time scales, organising works into cycles that can exceed the length of a typical concert, such as the two-hundred-minute *Nine Rivers* (written over the eighties and nineties). In 2019, he was discussing the idea of writing a large work with electric guitar for Shibe, but the pandemic intervened and the project was never realised. Still, the idea of writing something for guitar persisted, and in 2025, while Dillon was working on a larger work, inspiration struck almost unbidden:

> The Caprices came out of the blue – or should I say the moonlight, since there is perhaps a suggestion of *mondestrunken* about them. Written in a few days, I fairly quickly decided to stop at twelve – in some ways an arbitrary frame that might allow for an 'other' tension beyond the compression of each individual work, some attempt at shape. Individually, the distillation or economy of thought was spontaneous and not planned: I simply wanted to catch the immediacy of thought. Some pieces are more 'worked' than others and this contrast took on its own function. Here, of course, the number twelve and the overall arrangement then becomes crucial, containing what could have become an open-ended project. Practically, I could give only a few days to this unplanned project, given my pressing deadline for Bern. In retrospect, this was a blessing, since I did not have to wrestle with the temptation to develop.

Perhaps, after all, it is not surprising that Dillon, composer of vast musical cycles, should eventually find his way not just to short movements, but to miniatures of extreme compression. Beethoven, the composer of the *Hammerklavier Sonata*, is also the composer of the late Bagatelles, which also tend to set more developed pieces against less developed ones. Indeed, in Dillon's cycle, the most compressed pieces – the sphinx-like chordal ones, numbers 2, 4 and 12 – play a particularly important role in regulating the energy of the whole work. The second Caprice, in no key, sounds seven soft chords, each one different. The chords are arpeggiated, as though searching for the guitar's resonances and overtones. The fourth rocks four times between an A-minor chord and an E chord (derived from a pentatonic scale, E–G–A–B–D–E), again played very softly. Each chord after the first is preceded by a short, high note, and none of the chords are arpeggiated, as though something has now crystallised. When Shibe plays these chords, he subtly brings out a different note each time, at the composer's suggestion. The last Caprice in the set sounds like a memory of the fourth – two chords alternating four times, but now set in the major mode. As the chords repeat, the music swells

and then fades away, and the final chord is played three times. This is music that tempts one to count, to compare, to try to crack the code. But Dillon characterises musical miniatures as ‘an attempt at poetic concentration, like Blake’s grain of sand: there’s a glimpse into something not quite within reach, a melancholic vision’.

Jonathan Leathwood

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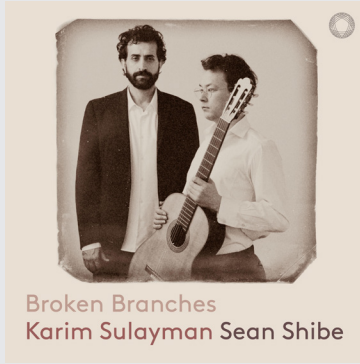

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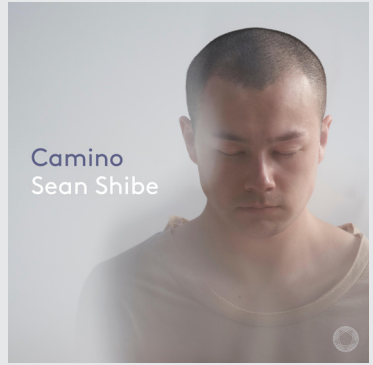

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Acknowledgements

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Production & Mastering **Matthew Swan** | Engineering & Post-production **Oscar Torres**

ARTWORK

Liner notes **Hugh Morris** & **Jonathan Leathwood**
Photography **Camilla Greenwell** (studio photos) & **Campbell Parker** (recording session)
Cover design **Marjolein Coenrady** (PENTATONE)
Booklet coordination & design **Ana Milovanović** (PENTATONE)

This album was recorded at Crichton Collegiate Chapel in Midlothian, Scotland, UK between June 12 & 13 and August 11 & 12, 2025.

Sean Shibe gratefully acknowledges the support of the Karolina Blaberg Stiftung and the Ralph Vaughan Williams Foundation, without which the production of this album would not have been possible.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS FOUNDATION

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