

MUSIC REVIEW; Brazilian Ways With Guitar, Plus Some Friendly Detours

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The summertime parade of seminars at the Mannes College of Music moved forward on Tuesday when the fourth annual New York Guitar Seminar began its five-day run of lectures, master classes and concerts. The focus this year is on Brazilian music, although the title of the seminar, "Brazil and Beyond," allows leeway for the inclusion of new work by North American composers whose involvement with Brazilian music is knowing that there is some.

There is also some leeway on the Brazilian side. Most of the Mannes seminars are devoted fully to classical works. But the line between the formal and the popular has long been porous in Brazilian music, and the directors of the seminar, the guitarists Michael Newman and Laura Oltman, have taken that into account.

Mr. Newman and Ms. Oltman, who perform as the Newman and Oltman Guitar Duo, played on the first half of the seminar's opening concert. After the intermission, they ceded the stage to Celso Machado, a Brazilian guitarist, composer, singer and percussionist whose music draws on classical and avant-garde techniques, but veers well into the sounds and textures of Brazilian pop.

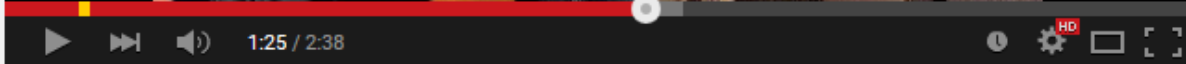
Whether a work is heard as classical or popular is also, to some extent, a function of how it is played. Mr. Newman and Ms. Oltman opened their set with "Brejeiro," a dance by Ernesto Nazareth. Nazareth, who flourished in the decades surrounding 1900, drew on the rhythms and harmonies of Brazilian street musicians and melded Latin and European dance forms -- waltzes and tangos, for example -- into distinctively Brazilian amalgams. A chorus ensemble can make it sound jazzy and improvised, but it is more frequently played by pianists who interpret it as a kind of Brazilian Chopin.

Mr. Newman and Ms. Oltman had it both ways. Their source was a piano score, arranged for guitars by Carlos Barbosa-Lima (who is also in the series). Its structural formalities were intact, and the duo's precise, finely balanced execution kept the graceful side of Nazareth's style in the spotlight, even as the guitar's timbres captured the music's more freewheeling aspect.

Much the same could be said of arrangements of vibrant, sunny dance pieces by Alfredo de Rocha Vianna and Luiz Simas, and of a suite of dances by Mr. Machado that Mr. Newman and Ms. Oltman played with the composer on percussion.

To fulfill the "beyond" part of the mandate, Mr. Newman and Ms. Oltman gave the New York premiere of Lowell Liebermann's "Nocturne-Fantasy" (Op. 69), an appealing score rich in contrapuntal dialogues and lush harmonies that owed something to the French Impressionists.

Mr. Machado's set was inventive and unbuttoned, and included mostly his own works, including straightforward popular songs and somewhat involved instrumental pieces. The highlight was his finale, "Rainforest," in which he drummed on his body (and persuaded the audience to do the same) and used rattles, whistles, electronic effects and an uncanny ability to imitate birds and animals, all in the service of evoking the supremely musical chaos of nature.



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