

St. Louis Post Dispatch Monday, September 30, 1991

Guitar Quartet Has Sellout Crowd at Debut

By John Huxhold

There were a number of firsts at the Ethical Society Saturday night. For one thing, it was the first concert of the season for the St. Louis Classical Guitar Society, and it was the first time since 1982 that the group had a sellout.

The performers – Joseph Hagedorn, Alan Johnston, David Crittenden and O. Nicholas Raths – are all well-known soloists, but for a few years have also been working together as the Minneapolis Guitar Quartet. Saturday was their debut in St. Louis.

Much of what they played was rhythmically dense and technically complicated, yet none of the players ever appeared to be stressed. Inner voices, prominent melodies and other highlighting efforts were always perfectly judged – which is to say that their communication as an ensemble was impressive. Technically perfect, they were also caught up in the spirit of each piece.

While I am sure it happened somewhere before, this is the first time I have encountered a classical guitar recital (including the encore) composed entirely of pieces written in the 20th century.

Like Rossini's thunderstorm in "William Tell," Leo Brouwer's impressionistic "Cuban Landscape with Rain" (1984) begins with gentle drops, then proceeds through a number of rain-related phenomena, including what sounds like hail on a tin roof. Leonardo Balada (b1 1933) has a more abstract descriptive task in "Apuntes," for the music is used to imitate certain geometric shapes. The section called "Verticals," for example, is mainly chordal, and "Horizontal" uses long, repetitive melodic lines; other movements use layers, mostly high notes, and massive guitar sonorities to make their effects.

In her 1987 "Genesis V," composer Janika Vandervelde of St. Paul assigns traditional names to some movements and uses others – "Palindrome Clockwork," "Dorian Clockwork" – that are descriptive of her compositional intentions. The work has a basically minimalist approach with a bit of flavoring reminiscent of Indian ragas and jazz improvisation. The "Suite del Sur" by Jorge Morel and Stravinsky's "Five Easy Pieces" (a transcription by Johnston of several of Stravinsky's four-hand piano pieces) rounded out the evening.