

## DISCOVERING LIBBY LARSEN'S MUSIC FOR GUITAR CLASSROOMS

By Jess Julian



Libby Larsen, 2017.

Classical guitar programs are becoming more prevalent in the United States in K–12 educational settings. These programs, once few and far between, are now supported by a movement of educators, students, parents, and administrators alike and impact schools positively. One major asset of these programs is their inclusive nature. They often reach students who may not ordinarily be involved in music at school.<sup>1</sup> While this is all positive, many of these programs are still in their infancy and therefore have room for growth. In addition, many guitar classes are directed by educators whose primary instrument is not guitar. For example, the choir director may be asked to teach a beginning guitar class. Competent choir directors may have had one guitar class in their training if they are lucky. Without experience, choosing a diverse and engaging repertoire can be challenging. Even directors whose primary instrument is guitar can benefit from

knowledge of a more diverse repertoire, as most classical guitar compositions and pedagogy have been written by men. In *Tonebase's* "Top 10 Classical Guitar Composers," all composers listed are men.<sup>2</sup> Pedagogy resources that have become standard in the field are written by men as well, like Christopher Parkening, Scott Tennant, and Aaron Shearer. While I am not suggesting we disregard these resources, how can we expand our guitar repertoire palette to include more diverse composers? By choosing diverse composers, we are finding meaningful ways to connect to students because they can see themselves in these models.

There are many composers and many ways to incorporate a diverse repertoire into the guitar classroom. In this article, I discuss American composer Libby Larsen's contributions to guitar literature. Larsen was born December 24, 1950, in Wilmington, Delaware, but her life was mostly spent in Minnesota, where she still resides today. While I focus on her guitar repertoire, her compositional output also includes five hundred works for solo instruments, orchestra, opera, vocal and chamber music, symphonic winds, and band. Among her many achievements, in 1973 Larsen cofounded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum. She is a Grammy Award winner and former holder of the Papamarkou Chair at John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress. In addition, Larsen has held residencies with the Minnesota Orchestra, Charlotte Symphony, and Colorado Symphony. As artistic director of the John Duffy Institute for New Opera from 2014 to 2020, she guided a faculty of practicing professional artists in nurturing and producing new opera by American composers. She is a leader not only as a composer but as an advocate for young composers and artists. Her voice is unique as her wide-ranging works include tonal and atonal aspects. References to other genres, such as jazz or popular music, often appear in her work, revealing her interest in different musics. She often takes traditional genres and creatively pushes and pulls the boundaries of those

<sup>1</sup> John R. Kramer, "The Effects of Classical Guitar Ensembles on Student Self-Perceptions and Acquisition of Music Skill," *Texas Music Education Research* (2012): 33–44; Robert Pethel, "The State of Guitar Education in the United States," *Journal of Popular Music Education* 3, no. 2 (July 2019): 73.

<sup>2</sup> Rosie Bennet, "Top 10 Classical Guitar Composers," *Tonebase Guitar* (blog), May 1, 2023, [tonebase.co/guitar-blog-posts/top-10-classical-guitar-composers](https://tonebase.co/guitar-blog-posts/top-10-classical-guitar-composers), accessed Feb 1, 2024.

specific conventions. When there is text involved in the work, she illuminates it above all else. Her connection to nature is often evident, sometimes in just the title of the piece.<sup>3</sup>

She breaks ground as a composer not only because of her merit but because of what she has overcome and her innovations. She has overcome much as a female composer in a male-dominated world, not only giving voice to herself but to other women. Her interdisciplinary efforts have led to innovative collaborations. She often sets poetry by women, composes operas based on literature by women, and features women protagonists in many stories. Larsen sheds light on social issues through her music, including women's rights, immigration, underrepresented people, and education. On her website, she shares links to articles, reviews, and speeches that feature her insight on many topics.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I explore Larsen's two solo guitar works, *Sarabande: In Profane Style* and *Argyle Sketches*; and two chamber compositions, *Blue Third Pieces* and *Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar*. I discuss the musical relevance of each piece, technical aspects for the performer, ways to incorporate the work in a wide range of guitar settings, and quality recordings of each piece.

for John Holmquist  
**SARABANDE**  
In Profane Style

LIBBY LARSEN

*Sarabande: In Profane style, opening.*

### *Sarabande: In Profane Style*

*Sarabande: In Profane Style* is a guitar solo written and published in 1996 and dedicated to the late John Holmquist, distinguished guitarist once associated with the Cleveland Institute of Music. In 2012, guitarist Alejandro Saladin Cote recorded this piece on his album *Silhouettes: New American Music for Guitar*.<sup>5</sup> The work is demanding and therefore would likely be performed by an advanced high school or college student. To successfully realize it, students must have proficient score-reading skills. They must also have command of standard left- and right-hand classical technique. The piece requires playing multiple textures from monophonic scalar figures to polyphony. In addition, chords are present, both blocked and rolled. Larsen writes in complex rhythms with time signatures and tempos that change frequently. Performers must pay close attention to the prescriptive dynamics and text. Extended techniques include *golpe* and *tambour*.

In addition to its requisite performance techniques, it is important to teach an analysis of the piece. This is true even for novice guitar classes, who cannot necessarily play the piece but might benefit from learning about it. It presents an opportunity to introduce the history of the sarabande and how Larsen both adheres to and abandons the genre's typical conventions, which appropriately reflects her subtitle, "In Profane Style."

To accurately analyze and teach Larsen's sarabande, it is important to understand the development of the genre. It originated first in Latin America then traveled to Spain as a sung dance during the sixteenth century. In 1583, it was banned in Spain for its obscenity. In the early seventeenth century, the sarabande came to Italy as part of the repertory of the Spanish five-course guitar. It was an energetic dance with sung text accompanied by guitar, castanets, and other percussion. In the 1630s, triple meter became a defining feature of the sarabande, with an accent on beat two. The French version of the sarabande was sectional. After 1640, the dance was closely associated with the guitar in Spain and Italy. In France and Germany, it appeared as a movement in keyboard and

<sup>3</sup> Denise Von Glahn, *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2017), 67; *Libby Larsen* (blog), "Resources," libbylarsen.com/resources, accessed Mar 5, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> *Libby Larsen* (blog), "About," libbylarsen.com/about, accessed Mar 5, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> *Silhouettes: New American Music* (CD), Alejandro Saladin Cote, guitar, Artek AR-0058-2, 2012: "Sarabande: In Profane Style" by Libby Larsen, track 23; Libby Larsen, *Sarabande: In Profane Style* (Minneapolis: Libby Larsen, 1997).

## DISCOVERING LIBBY LARSEN'S MUSIC (cont.)

lute suites as a slower triple-meter dance. Given these early associations, it is fitting that Larsen's sarabande is written for solo guitar. The composer uses typical sarabande rhythms such as ♩ ♩ ♩, followed by quarter-note values. Students can explore these historical nods in her piece and how Larsen uses and discounts the typical conventions of the form.<sup>6</sup>

Guitar

Catalog No. 5411  
**Argyle Sketches**  
for Guitar Solo  
I. Étude  
Libby Larsen, 1973

Allegro ♩ = 80  
mp  
f  
ritardando

*Argyle Sketches*, I. Étude, opening.

### *Argyle Sketches*

Another solo piece by Larsen is *Argyle Sketches*, premiered in 1974 by Jeffrey Van, guitar instructor at the University of Minnesota and a teacher of John Holmquist. It also appears on Alejandro Cote's album *Silhouettes*.<sup>7</sup> The piece is comprised of four movements, its title referring to a small vessel, or argyle, that holds those movements. Like *Sarabande: In Profane Style*, this piece is suited for an advanced high school or college student and requires much the same proficiency as *Sarabande*. The performer must attend to the work's dynamics, tessitura, and harmonics. Being a multi-movement piece, the performer must play in the style of each movement, standard compositional types eponymous with their titles.

The first movement is Étude. "Étude" is the French equivalent of "study," but in the twentieth century

the term also indicated a piece that explored a specific aspect of the composer's craft. The second movement is Berceuse, a berceuse being a lullaby, or in instrumental music, a character piece. Common characteristics include compound time, quiet dynamic level, tonic pedal bass, and accompaniment oscillating in a rocking motion between tonic and dominant. The third movement is Fugato. A fugato resembles a fugue in some ways but lacks the necessary characteristics of a true fugue. The word could also refer to a fugal section of a piece otherwise non-fugal. The fourth movement is Ayre. An ayre (or air) refers to secular vocal music, not including the madrigal. The term also came to refer to lute song during the early seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> Students can learn from lessons on analysis how Larsen both adheres to and disregards each movement's different conventions. Educators are also given a great opportunity to connect these genres to other composers, instruments, and eras. For example, students can listen to a traditional etude by a classical-era guitar composer like Matteo Carcassi, or the well-known lullaby, or berceuse, by Johannes Brahms. Students can explore a J. S. Bach fugue for keyboard, string instrument, or ensemble, or a John Dowland song for lute and voice.

### *Blue Third Pieces*

Larsen also has composed valuable chamber music that can help guitarists connect and play with other musicians. Classical guitarists spend much of their time practicing and performing solo repertoire alone, but guitar classes as well as guitar duos, trios, quartets, and larger collectives provide students with opportunities to build their ensemble skills. Teachers can also connect with the band, orchestra, and/or choir programs at their school for students to play music with other instruments. *Blue Third Pieces* is a two-movement work for guitar and flute or clarinet, consisting of "Deep Blue" and "Salt Peanuts." It was commissioned and premiered by flutist Susan Morris DeJong, with Jeffrey Van on guitar, in 1996. In 2005, flutist Caroline Hartig and guitarist Christopher Kachian recorded *Blue Third Pieces* on

<sup>6</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Sarabande," by Richard Hudson and Meredith Ellis Little, Jan 20, 2001; Laura Dallman, "Libby Larsen and Sarabande: In Profane Style by Laura Dallman," *Illuminate Women's Music* (blog), Jan 9, 2018, [www.illuminatewomensmusic.co.uk/illuminate-blog/libby-larsen-and-sarabande-in-profane-style-by-laura-dallman](http://www.illuminatewomensmusic.co.uk/illuminate-blog/libby-larsen-and-sarabande-in-profane-style-by-laura-dallman); Larsen, *Sarabande* (see note 5).

<sup>7</sup> *Silhouettes* (see note 5): "Argyle Sketches" by Libby Larsen, tracks 19–22; Libby Larsen, *Argyle Sketches* (St. Louis: ECS, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Étude," Jan 20, 2001; "Berceuse" by Kenneth L. Hamilton, Jan 20, 2001; "Fugato" by Paul M. Walker, Jan 20, 2001; "Air" by Nigel Fortune, David Greer and Charles Dill, Jan 20, 2001.

**BLUE THIRD PIECES**  
For Flute (or B<sup>b</sup> Clarinet) and Guitar

Deep Blue

Libby Larsen

*Blue Third Pieces*, I. Deep Blue, opening.

their album *Dancing Solo*.<sup>9</sup> This piece is again suited for advanced high school or college students and requires the proficiencies outlined for the pieces above. In comparison to her solo guitar works, Larsen writes somewhat simpler rhythms, but by no means are they easy to play. “Deep Blue” is in 5/8 with tempo changes, while “Salt Peanuts” includes time signature as well as tempo changes. Fully consistent with Larsen’s style overall, the performer must again navigate dynamics, wide tessitura, and harmonics.

*Blue Third Pieces* can be incorporated into many guitar settings. It is an homage to the interval of the third and its place in the blues. “Deep Blue” is lyrical, beginning with a chorale-like motive in the guitar. Its melody emphasizes the blue (flatted) third in its lower notes. “Salt Peanuts” is based on the 1945 jazz piece of the same name by Dizzy Gillespie and Kenny Clark, which features the famous “salt peanuts” gesture. This gesture is a large leap back and forth, usually an octave, in combination with a repeated, syncopated rhythm. Larsen uses the gesture too, but with an interval of a seventh instead of an octave. In the last section of the movement, Larsen pays tribute to one of her musical

heroes, Ray Charles, in the guitar part. Because the piece emphasizes certain intervals and has connections to other genres, educators can be creative with how they use *Blue Third Pieces* for study. The music does not necessarily need to be performed to be of benefit to students. For example, a guitar class studying intervals could label every third and seventh found in the score. Students could explore the other genres featured in this piece such as jazz and popular music, along with artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny Clark, and Ray Charles.

**I. Presto-digital**

Libby Larsen

*Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar*, I. Presto-Digital, opening.

**Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar**  
*Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar* is another valuable chamber music piece by Larsen. The wind instrument can be flute, oboe, B<sup>b</sup> clarinet, or alto saxophone. Teachers can connect with the band program at their school to find wind players to perform this work. Its constituent three pieces began as a single movement. *Circular Rondo*, now the second piece of the set, was first written for Jeffrey Van. The following year, Larsen composed the third piece, *Canti Breve*, as a wedding gift for her friend, Lynne Aspnes. She finally composed *Presto-Digital* as the set’s first piece. Hartig and Kachian also recorded *Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar* on their *Dancing Solo* album.<sup>10</sup> The work is also suited for advanced high school or college students with the requisite skills discussed above. The

<sup>9</sup> *Dancing Solo* (CD), Caroline Hartig, clarinet, and Christopher Kachian, guitar, Innova 512, 2005; “Blue Third Pieces,” by Libby Larsen, tracks 2–3; Libby Larsen, *Blue Third Pieces* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Libby Larsen, “Blue Third Pieces,” libbylarsen.com/works/blue-third-pieces, accessed Mar 5, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Hartig and Kachian, *Dancing Solo*: “Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar” by Libby Larsen, tracks 2–3; Libby Larsen, *Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Libby Larsen (blog), “Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar,” libbylarsen.com/works/three-pieces-for-treble-wind-and-guitar, accessed Mar 19, 2023.

## DISCOVERING LIBBY LARSEN'S MUSIC (cont.)

piece covers a range of tempos, meters, dynamics, and rhythms including hemiola, and features a variety of articulations such as harmonics, ponticello, rasgueado, and pizzicato.

Students who may not have the ability to play *Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar* can still learn from the diverse forms and motivic connections exhibited therein. *Presto-Digital* is at a fast tempo and in ABA form. *Circular Rondo* is slower and is in seven-part rondo form, as the title suggests. *Canti Breve* is slow and free in form. Both instruments in all three pieces exchange musical ideas back and forth rhythmically and melodically. More specifically, *Canti Breve* connects with *Presto-Digital* by sharing similar motives. By discussing these different forms and defining what a motive is, students can analyze each piece individually and in addition learn how the three relate to one another. Once students have a strong hold on these concepts, they can apply them in their own compositions. They can investigate forms such as ABA, rondo, or something freer. Their understanding of motivic material and structure can be demonstrated between each section of their piece, all of which gives them an opportunity to do something they may not have done before: compose.

### Conclusion

My hope is that educators can use this article as a resource for programming music with their guitar classes of all levels. By programming and teaching a diverse repertoire, educators will reach students from different backgrounds. Igniting the love for classical guitar in students is one of the most important things we as educators do. Classical guitar will continue to evolve as teachers make it a priority to diversify the repertoire and listen to student needs. Larsen's guitar catalog offers varied points of entry for students at all levels. Performance of her solo and chamber pieces is an obvious way to engage with Larsen's music, but it needn't be limited to that. Her guitar pieces embrace manifold techniques, articulations, and dynamics on the instrument. They facilitate teaching musical form, connecting diverse genres, and studying other composers. There are many ways learning can take shape, and simply introducing students to this music will reap rewards. It will take effort and creativity to expand the guitar canon, but educators and students will be better for it.



Jess Julian (b. 1994) is pursuing a DMA in guitar performance at the University of Memphis in Tennessee. Recognized as an exceptional performer in a variety of genres including classical, jazz, and popular music, Jess is a published composer as well as a dedicated educator and activist, serving on the faculty at Mississippi State University as Lecturer of Guitar. In addition to musical ventures, Jess enjoys listening to podcasts, hiking, and coffee.



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