



presti



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The legendary Ida Presti is the inspiration for this group of prominent classical guitarists (Olga Amelkina-Vera, Valerie Hartzell, and Lynn McGrath) who met at a festival in Texas in 2010 and decided to create the first professional all-women guitar ensemble in the US. Initially a quartet, Presti dedicates this album to the memory of founding member Sabine Madriguera, whose life, like Ida Presti's, was cut tragically short by illness.

Having given recitals on four continents, Presti's members draw on a wealth of performance experience. With undergraduate and graduate music degrees from such prominent music programs as the Peabody Conservatory, the University of North Texas, and the University of Southern California, the women of Presti collectively have nine degrees, speak five languages fluently, and have worked with some of the most renowned guitarists and teachers in the world.

Presti has performed across the US, headlining such events as the "Classical Minds" Festival and Competition in Houston, the Seventh Annual Guitar Orchestra Festival in Plano, the Fort Worth Guitar Guild Music Festival and the Annual Classical Guitar Fall Festival in Oneonta, NY. They have been guest artists on various series and for colleges and universities in Florida, New Mexico, New York, North and South Carolina and Texas and have performed live on The Front Row on Houston's KUHA 91.7 FM and on Classic Café on Dallas WRR Classical 101.1 FM.

Presti's programs fill a gap in the guitar trio repertoire by presenting tantalizing new arrangements of music from different eras, original compositions and specially commissioned works. A native of Belarus, Olga Amelkina-Vera is an award-winning composer with an eclectic style, while French-American Valerie Hartzell's Turina arrangements evoke the fire and soul of Southern Spain.

Acknowledgements

This recording would not have been possible without the financial support of Greg and Jean Waleke, Anita and Amit Patel, Lucinda H. Benton, Julie Levin, Kickstarter donors, students, friends, family, and private donors. We are most grateful to Chris Duncan of the Frisco School of Music for her valuable help.

We would like to thank Fernand Vera for assisting in the production of this recording.

We would also like to thank our most influential teachers, who include Manuel Barrueco, Robert Guthrie, Ako Ito, Tom Johnson, William Kanengiser, Alexandre Lagoya, Matteo Mela, Pepe Romero, Douglas Rubio, James Smith, and many others who have given us advice and inspiration throughout the years.

Program

- 1: **Toccata-Humoresque (2011)** (5:28)..... **Olga Amelkina-Vera**
(b. 1976)

- Capriccio sopra la lontananza del suo fratello diletissimo
(Capriccio on the Departure of His Beloved Brother), BWV 992
arr. Robert Xavier Rodriguez **Johann Sebastian Bach**
(1685–1750)
- 2: **I. Arioso** (His friends coax him to give up his journey) (1:39)
- 3: **II. Andante (Fugato)**
(They describe the various accidents that might befall him) (1:07)
- 4: **III. Adagio (Passacaglia)** (They join in a lament) (2:20)
- 5: **IV. Andante con moto**
(Seeing that after all there is no help for it, they come to say goodbye) (0:24)
- 6: **V. Poco allegro** (Song of the postilion) (1:11)
- 7: **VI. Allegro (Fugue)** (Imitating the post-horn) (2:29)

- 8: **Mérida (2005)** (3:04)..... **Mark Anthony Cruz**
(b. 1963)

- Danzas gitanas (Gypsy Dances), Op. 55 arr. Valerie Hartzell **Joaquín Turina**
(1882–1949)
- 9: **I. Zambra** (3:42)
- 10: **II. Danza de la seducción** (Seduction Dance) (3:44)
- 11: **III. Danza ritual** (Ritual Dance) (2:23)
- 12: **IV. Generalife** (2:08)
- 13: **V. Sacro-monte** (1:57)

- From Lessons for 1, 2 and 3 Viols (1609) arr. Olga Amelkina-Vera **Alfonso Ferrabosco the Younger**
(c. 1575–1628)
- 14: **A Pavin for Three Viols** (4:57)
- 15: **A Fancie for Three Viols** (4:36)

- In Memory of Sabine Madriguera*
- 16: **Ninotchka (2009)*** (2:35)..... **Olga Amelkina-Vera**
- 17: **Hellish Tattoo of the Heart (2010)*** (2:14)

* with special guest, *Fernand Vera*

◡ Notes on the program ◡

Until the twentieth century, no one composed for the guitar unless they themselves could perform on the instrument. The last hundred years have seen prominent, even revolutionary collaborations between guitarists and mainstream composers, and yet the figure of the guitarist-composer remains just as distinctive and indispensable. Today's guitarists are more involved in chamber music than at any time in the past, resulting in a constant demand for new music—a demand often met by the players themselves. Two player-composers are featured in this collection, Olga Amelkina-Vera and Mark Anthony Cruz, both now based in Texas but with very different heritages. The remaining works are transcriptions from viol, harpsichord and piano.

Olga Amelkina-Vera's *Toccata-Humoresque* is an archetypal player-composer project: a piece that has undergone many changes in the process of performing and rehearsing. The final version emerges as a self-portrait of the members of Presti, full of humor, emotion and lively exchange. It also strongly reflects the composer's origins: Amelkina-Vera grew up in Belarus, later receiving her formal musical education in Texas; she wryly remarks that whatever musical influence you think you recognize in her music, you are probably right. Still, an Eastern European flavor often comes through in its tremolando-based textures and Slavic-tinged harmonies. More generally, her melodies (both here and in the quartet *Ninotchka*) often have an arching, unashamedly sentimental character that she acknowledges as typical of her homeland.

Bach's early harpsichord work *Capriccio on the Departure of His Beloved Brother* offers a rare glimpse of the very young composer: Bach before he became Bach, so to speak, but

a musician already utterly confident of emulating and surpassing his models—in this case, Kuhnau's Sonatas for keyboard on Bible stories, published in 1700. Bach's *Capriccio* has stories of its own: the "beloved brother" (*fratro dilettissimo*) was never named by Bach or his circle, but in his 1873 biography of Bach, Philipp Spitta proposed as a candidate Johann Jacob Bach, Sebastian's younger brother, who joined the Swedish army a few years after 1700. Recent scholarship suggests that it was far more likely one of Bach's childhood friends, perhaps a classmate from Lüneberg such as his fellow choirboy Georg Erdmann.

The *Capriccio* shows Bach's early facility with musical word-painting, adumbrating the achievements of his mature sacred music. The story begins with frequent cadences and falling phrase endings as friends argue for the security of home. Then comes a *fugato* depicting the dangers of foreign travel in a chain of precarious modulations. The third movement is a lament, counterpointing sighing, chromatic figures over a ground bass, while the fourth is a short depiction of the friends' farewell, in chains of overlapping falling scales. "Seeing that there is no help for it," as Bach tells us, the last two movements are all high spirits: the "Song of the Postilion" punctuates a whistling tune with the cries of the horseman (postilion) to his horses, while the final fugue combines these cries with the sound of the coach's horn.

Mark Anthony Cruz's first musical influence was his father, a Mariachi musician, and *Mérida* began life as part of an album of solo guitar pieces dedicated to his father. Later, he expanded its textures into versions for guitar trio and guitar quartet. While still sketching the piece, Cruz made a transformative visit to Mérida, capital of the Mexican state

of Yucatán. There he was fascinated by the virtuosity of the local musicians on the streets and in the bars. He immediately recognized, however, that it would be impossible to imitate their style faithfully without years of immersion in the culture. He thus completed *Mérida* as a souvenir of his stay there, but in his own "Spanish" style.

Some of *Mérida*'s details owe just as much to Bach: formally, the piece is a rondo with an introduction and coda, but instead of the discrete contrasting episodes one might expect from a rondo, the sections flow seamlessly together, developing details of the rondo theme and sometimes returning to it in contrasting keys.

The turn of the century saw a great Spanish musical revival, as composers mined their own folk traditions to create a powerfully distinctive style. Naturally, the sound of the Spanish guitar permeates this music, but always at a distance: everything is translated to the piano, to traditional chamber ensembles, to the orchestra. The two great pioneers, Albéniz and Granados, never wrote directly for the guitar (in spite of the many transcriptions guitarists have made of their music); the next outstanding figure, Manuel de Falla, produced only a single miniature for guitar. These composers were eager to reach an international audience, and at that time the guitar was scarcely accepted as a vehicle for the serious concert music they wished to write.

But when Joaquín Turina emerged as the last of the great quaternity of Spanish nationalist composers, there was Segovia: a guitarist with the ability and charisma to appeal to a worldwide audience. The two men, fellow Andalusians, formed an easy friendship and Turina wrote several substantial guitar works for Segovia to play. The *Gypsy Dances* played here by Presti are originally for piano, but they were written between 1929 and 1930 in the midst of Turina's preoccupation with the guitar, and they are imbued with its patterns and sonorities.

The piano was Turina's own instrument: whenever he turned to it, it was to create miniatures of special intimacy, at times almost confessional in quality. This is especially true of the *Gypsy Dances*, sketches of people, places and customs in the gypsy communities of Andalusia. The sense of eavesdropping on a private community is especially strong in the dances of seduction and ritual. Two other movements lend a sense of place: the Generalife is the Moorish palace lying close to Granada, while Sacromonte is the gypsy quarter of Granada. The first movement, *Zambra*, is named after a flamenco dance, only one of many such dances that are invoked throughout the set.

As soon as he had completed the *Gypsy Dances*, Turina made an orchestral version, as he did with much of his piano music. Valerie Hartzell's transcription for three guitars reflects her own experience of studying the piano (her childhood studies led to a minor in piano at the Peabody Conservatory). Guitars can never match the piano in power or range of pitch; but after practicing these dances in their original version, she found that with three guitars it is possible to approach the textures of the piano quite closely, using high harmonics to expand the range and octaves to thicken the textures.

Turina could hardly have imagined this transcription: professional guitar ensembles such as Presti lay far in the future. Surely, though, he would have enjoyed hearing his piano works on guitars. The naturally uneven resonances and colors of the guitars give the effect of an orchestration — and yet paradoxically, they only enhance the intimacy.

The Renaissance viol has much in common with the guitar: although it is bowed, it has, like the guitar, six strings and a fretted fingerboard. Much of the viol's extensive repertory of solo and consort works must lend itself easily to the guitar, yet so far guitarists have barely taken it up. Olga Amelkina-Vera studied the viol alongside the guitar at the

University of North Texas, and her transcription of two trios by Alfonso Ferrabosco the Younger offer a tantalizing foray into this repertoire: the viol parts are performed unaltered, save for a few additional notes in the chords of the *Pavin*.

In royal service throughout his life, Ferrabosco was widely recognized as the finest viol player in England. Both pieces are from his book of *Lessons*, published in London in 1609 and the earliest book of music devoted exclusively to the lra viol. In his preface, Ferrabosco complains that he has been forced to publish his music because so much of it has been circulated under the name of other composers. He compares his pieces to children who have "lost their dwellings" and found "false parents"; to acknowledge them as his own is, he says, "an act of nature and justice." It is a poignant analogy: he was born illegitimate, and although his parents were soon married, they left for Italy when he was very small. Alfonso grew up in England under the guardianship of one of Queen Elizabeth's flutists, never to be reunited with his parents.

As a composer, Ferrabosco made his mark in music for the stage, in song, and in solo and consort viol music. Of the trios in this collection, the *Pavin* (or Pavane) looks back to the high Renaissance: equal-voiced and intensely contemplative. The *Fancie* (or Fantasy) is in a two-part form that is Ferrabosco's trademark: the first part is in the major mode and the second in the minor. Although both sections are highly intricate and full of overlapping entries, it is just possible to discern that the first is based throughout on its opening idea, while the second develops several ideas in turn.

The recital ends with two quartets by Amelkina-Vera that were composed for the original Presti Quartet. *Ninoshka* (affectionate diminutive of Nina) is named after the composer's mother and is thus another portrait — or rather, a portrait of a portrait, inspired as it was by a photograph of

Nina as a nine-year-old girl. The music explores the child within the adult, initially in a habanera, with the guitarists wittily providing their own percussion section. Later sections depict Nina as "mischievous and playful" and "with attitude," before we come to the melancholy and romantic waltz at the center of the piece.

Hellish Tattoo of the Heart takes its title from Edgar Allen Poe's 1843 story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, in which a murderer narrates his own crime. It is fundamentally a story about hearing: as he begins his tale, the murderer tells us that in his nervous condition, "above all was the sense of hearing acute." Waiting in the dark to commit murder, he seems to hear his victim's heart beating: "Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant." Afterward he hides the body under the floorboards, but when the police come to search the premises the heartbeat seems to reverberate everywhere.

Amelkina-Vera explores the story's macabre sound-image in a short piece that uses very few conventionally played notes—her approach was inspired in part by the sounds of John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, and recordings of noise-rock band The Jesus Lizard. The opening heartbeat rhythm is muffled, and as the piece becomes ever louder and more frantic, every sound is either stifled or immediately muted. The piece features especially the sound of the left hand tapping on the string (first heard around ten seconds into the track). Guitarists know that fretting the string too percussively creates an unwanted high pitch as the string vibrates between the finger and the nut. In conventional music one takes great pains to mask this sound; *Hellish Tattoo of the Heart*, by contrast, exaggerates it. All of these techniques evoke the confounding of audible and inaudible that is at the core of Poe's story.

— Jonathan Leathwood



Recorded at Houston Public Radio, Classical 91.7 (www.KUHF.org)

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