

Arpeggios

The guitar is really an instrument to be played in an arpeggiated manner. This property is what Johnson uses in *Arpeggios* (2001). This is evident from the first piece, *Open Strings*, based on a rapid arpeggio of 12 notes, repeated in ostinato. Very wide in range, it extends over all six open strings. The left hand is totally unused, much less than in the *Canon for Six Guitars*. The strings vibrate as they are, according to the most common conventional tuning, like a discovery of the instrument.

On top of this repeated figure, accents appear, according to a process invented by Johnson: that of self-similar melodies. One out of every five notes is accented, and the melodic sequence formed by these emphasized notes is exactly the same as the basic arpeggio. This means that it is written so that, if we take one note out of five, we find the same succession of notes. Johnson states this by saying that the *Arpeggio* reproduces itself in the ratio of 5:1. There is self-similarity in the sense that the melody contains in itself a larger scale replication of its own design. In mathematics, this type of structure relates to the field of fractals.

However all this is not very easy to perceive by listening. The interpretation of Tony Peña is fast and very fluid. The guitarist succeeded in making the accented notes stand out, but at the same time the ostinato takes place in a kind of halo or fog, due to the resonance of the strings.

The second piece, *E's and B's*, works at a 3:1 ratio (and also at 9:1), and uses a much shorter ostinato of only four notes. The ostinato is not played in two speeds but in three. Also unlike *Open Strings*, Johnson chose to present the slowest speed first with the ratio 9:1 in the bass register, then the 3:1 in the medium register and finally the 1:1 in the high register. This time, the task of the left hand is not only present, but also becomes very technical when the three speeds are combined. After a passage of a virtuosity that is not suspected, the progression is reversed and the piece ends as it began.

The next movement, *Weaving*, is the most danceable and rhythmic of all. At the same time it is also the least arpeggiated, if one may say that. The arpeggio from which its ostinato is taken is actually very brief, and narrow in range. It consists of five notes (A, F, D, G, E) that run continuously from start to finish, in a rather high register. On this mechanical background, variations are obtained only by metric changes, and thus, by displacement of accents. Here the melody is not self-similar, but the changes in accents reveal other surprising tunes. In fact the ratio 3:1 yields the five notes arranged in descending order (A, G, F, E, D). Then, if we take every second note (2:1 ratio) we are again surprised to see the scale ascending (D, E, F, G, A). That's basically what the movement is made of, with reprises and transitional passages.

The fourth piece, *Loops*, shares several common points with the first. It includes a fast and complex arpeggio, this time of 15 notes, using exclusively open strings, and follows a process of self-similarity. This time, however, the arpeggio is limited to three strings (A, D, G), and the notes are highlighted not by accents but by harmonics, obtaining rather unreal, diaphanous, light sounds. The incredible, in the case of this piece, is that the melody is self-similar at 4:1, 7:1, 9:1, and 11:1! But this mathematical prowess is not really noticeable. We are caught in a parade of sounds where harmonics appear, floating, increasingly spaced, like stars in the firmament.

Johnson again uses harmonics in the fifth and final part, *Coda*, whose title already suggests that it is a bit apart. Slow and calm, it goes back to the beginning of the collection through the use of six open strings, but installs a meditative atmosphere that marks the end of a cycle, like rest follows activity. Notes are threaded in rising and falling arpeggios that progress by going out of phase: the first begins and ends with the low E, the second with the A, the third with D, and so on, with all six strings. Each of these six phrases ends with a long rest over which resonates a first harmonic, then a second, higher still. Thus, the piece progresses upward until it finishes, and with it the whole set of *Arpeggios*. This last piece is very simple in design, but the beauty of resonances, with Tony Peña's lightly undulating electric guitar, opens into immense spaces. The guitar seems immobile, like a set of suspended bells, and its sound radiates into the distance.

—Gilbert Delor (August 2016)