

FANFARE MAGAZINE Feature Article by Robert Schulslaper

On the Trail with Aaron Larget-Caplan, Lullaby Hunter

During the past four years, guitarist Aaron Larget-Caplan has become an expert in lullabies, not because he's an insomniac in search of a good night's sleep, but by immersing himself in contemporary versions of this beloved bedtime ritual. He has commissioned and performed more than 20 and recorded 14 on his recent CD, *New Lullaby*. Not every composer who answered Aaron's call to write a lullaby responded with gentle, soothing music; a few addressed the anxieties that sometimes accompany our nightly visits to slumber land.

Q: Ho do you view this dichotomy in what would seem, at first glance, a primarily peaceful genre? Are these darker lullabies the musical echo of fairy tales' often frightening imagery?

A: That's a close parallel. If you look at the words to a traditional lullaby like *Rock-a-Bye Baby*—"Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop, when the wind blows, the cradle will rock"—that's a scary song. There's a lullaby that Leo Brouwer arranged, an Afro-Cuban lullaby (*Cancion de cuna*) that I recorded on my first disc, *Tracing a Wheel on Water*. The words are, "You have to keep your feet under the blankets at night while you sleep or little monsters will eat your toes." I find this a lot in Latin American poetry and music, where there's this very dark theme with a warm melody. Revueltas does this in his music, Ginastera does it, anything that has a folk tradition to it. It has to do with the Spanish influence, too, because Flamenco does that. Even their happy music is very sad. So mixing that idea with African and native populations you get this sound that you don't expect. Northern Europeans and Americans have that in their culture, but we've just kind of watered it down. We're very afraid of death. If you read the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, they're dark. They really go into a lot of humanity's deepest concerns and what goes on in people's brains. It's striking.

Another piece that influenced the project is Takemitsu's arrangement of George Gershwin's *Summertime*. That's just the opposite, "Your daddy's rich and your mother's good looking," everything good is in that lullaby. When I started commissioning these pieces I didn't specify that they had to be happy or sad, dark or light; I just said, "Write me some beautiful music." And the first one I got was *Disturbed*, by David Leisner [laughs]. He was a former teacher of mine at the New England Conservatory and so he, of course, was one of the first that I thought to include on this project. Once I'd seen his piece, I told him, "You know, David, this is really dark." But it was written in 2006, end of 2006, there were two wars going on, Bush was head of power and David lived in New York where there were still a lot of remnants of 9/11. It wasn't considered the warmest time in American history and I think he grabs that and does a good job with it. It's not that a lullaby must be warm but ... I think sometimes with kids you want to scare them and make sure they don't get out of bed. Little monsters will do it [laughs].

Mark Small's *Descent to a Dream* is another surprising lullaby. It starts with a beautiful melody but there's a part in the middle with rapid *rasgueados*, heavy strumming, that makes it difficult to program because it sticks out so much. I picked his brain about this—I have living composers, I can do this—and he said that that's the moment when, after falling asleep, you suddenly wake up with a jerk prompted by some anxiety, as in, "Oh, my gosh, I forgot to do something." Certainly, I've had that happen. Also, I think it adds a nice change, kind of wakes people up for the last half of the concert [laughs].

Q: It's a clever idea, but it probably wouldn't be what I'd choose to fall asleep to.

A: I have friends who put their kids to sleep with music that I would never listen to to wake up with. I think it's like when the TV goes to snow. *Song Softly Sung in Trying Times*, by Eric Schwartz, uses white noise in the background with the melody just above. For me, it's very true to life, as my stepbrother would often fall asleep in front of the television. He'd go downstairs and turn on the television, which was right next to my room. So I would wake up to the sound of snow on the TV. When Eric wrote this I thought it was hilarious because I had such a direct relationship with that experience. It seems a lot of people have to have noise on in the background to fall asleep.

There's such a wide range of pieces; they're all extremely different. Someone called them haikus or mini-

narratives. Each has its own story. There are the wild, dissonant ones, and then there are a few warmer ones, although the stories behind them may not have been as warm as the music: Jonathan Feist's two lullabies, *Leaky Roof*, about a roof leaking right by a child's bed, or *No Time*, about a father's first night alone while his baby and his wife are in the hospital. They're both in major keys and very simple in construction. As the CD continues the lullabies start to get a bit darker. *My Darling's Slumber*, by Francine Trester, has some unusual harmonies and is a play on Stephen Foster's song *Slumber My Darling*, which she heard as a child. Scott Wheeler's piece, *Nachtlied*, is inspired by the poetry of Goethe and he and I worked quite a bit on it. He's a very fine composer but not a guitarist. He wrote me this solo that on paper looked so easy, but on the guitar it doesn't work that way, so I had to really work to get what he wanted. Also, after meeting he saw that I had many more techniques available, so he added a harmonics section at the end at my suggestion. What's really neat with all of the pieces, even the ones by guitarist/composers, was the exchange of ideas. "Is this what you mean? Does this phrase move this way or that way?"

I added harmonics, pizzicatos, or a palm mute in places to diversify the textures. I had found composers to be intimidated by the guitar, so I started this project with the idea of demystifying it. It's funny in a way, because who's afraid of a lullaby? I mean, it's the most non-intimidating music we have, so I try and make myself available to those who want to experiment to show them what's possible and sadly a lot of them end up writing much more difficult music [laughs].

Q: Has your relationship with the composers expanded beyond the lullabies?

A: Yes! That's been really wonderful. Thomas L. Reed, from Vermont, wrote me a beautiful lullaby that will be premiered later this season, called *The Moon Through the Window Shines Down*. Very simple little thing, although I don't believe music is actually easy; I think simple's different from easy. He had written a violin and guitar piece that was extremely difficult. I mean, yikes!

Q: All part of the job.

A: That's true. The sweat's a good thing. After talking he expressed a wish to write more for the guitar, so he recently wrote me a string quartet with guitar called *Capricci* that's very playable, which is wonderful. It's exciting and will be premiered later this coming April or May.

Q: What else do you have going on?

A: I've just recorded some songs with baritone Donald Wilkinson, for his CD *Classic American Songs*. We did a couple of Stephen Foster songs with Orland Cela on flute and I arranged Evan Abba's *Nature Boy* for voice and guitar. That will be out in the fall. A disc of compositions by composer Hayg Boyadjian will be released in October 2010 on Albany Records. I perform a very cool solo tango, *Mi Tango*, which is an homage to Astor Piazzolla. It's the extreme opposite of any of the lullabies. Hayg is Armenian but was born in Paris, grew up in Buenos Aires, and finally came to the United States, where he's lived for the past 30 years. His music is percussive, colorful, and in *Mi Tango*, he takes the typical tango beat and changes it up, bringing out different accents. It's a virtuosic, very demanding piece.

Of course, the *New Lullaby Project* continues, with another four or five lullabies to be premiered this season. I'm talking with a publisher about putting out an anthology, which should help get the music out. Every piece has its own little technical difficulty, but I would say that about 80 percent is very playable as they're lullabies, they're not dances set at an insane tempo.

Q: I understand that you recently made your orchestral debut with the Rodrigo Concierto de Aranjuez.

A: Yes, last March, and I'll be doing more of that. It was a great experience and people really responded. I'm also going to be giving some concerts in California, as well as in Arizona, and I'll be playing separately with a couple of dancers that I've worked with quite often, La Conja and Gabriela Granados. They are flamenco dancers and choreographers who also sing. Our group's called *Con Fuego!*, which means *With Fire!* If it were classical Italian it would be *Con Fuoco*, but we want to emphasize the Spanish element. We juxtapose classical pieces by Manuel de Falla, Isaac Albéniz, Granados, Francisco Tárrega, and then they choreograph

to them. They are able to blend what they call bolero or Spanish ballet with contemporary flamenco. They sing the *Seven Spanish Songs* by Falla in a flamenco style, which is actually what Falla wanted but he couldn't get a singer who could do it. We perform as a duo, trio, or quartet with violin, cello, or percussion, and that's been very exciting. We have also collaborated with orchestras and string quartets doing Bizet, Rodrigo, and Falla's *El Amor Brujo*. So we're going to continue with that and keep moving and playing more music.

Q: When you play flamenco, do you improvise?

A: I improvise in the sense of how I follow the dancer: Stop, go, speed up, slow down, add colors, percussions, but I haven't delved into improvisation in the traditional way. I do it when I'm alone [laughs].

Q: I only wondered because it's a big part of flamenco.

A: It is, it is. But as the focus of the group is to combine flamenco dance and Spanish classical music I don't have to improvise.

Q: Do you play other contemporary music besides the lullabies?

A: Quite a bit. I'm playing a Carter piece right now, *Shard*. It's a short one, which is fine. After about five minutes my brain tends to go "ouch." It's very dense. *Shard* is the first work of Carter's that I've delved into.

I've often thought of Babbitt's article "Who Cares If You Listen," and I've decided that *I* do. When I've told classical musicians about the *New Lullaby Project*, some of them asked, "Why would you do a CD of kids' music?" My answer was, it's not kids' music. A lullaby is for the parents to put the kid to sleep with, it's the parents who use the lullaby. Interestingly, non-musicians tend to say, "Wow, a lullaby. Why haven't I ever seen this before?"

Q: Do you ever perform the complete series of lullabies?

A: I haven't quite got up the chutzpah to do a whole concert of lullabies; I'm afraid I'll put everyone to sleep! I've done groups of them and tried different ways of programming them. One of my programs is *Dance, Love, Sleep*, in which I do a dance, a love song, and a lullaby. I introduce the set but don't say anything between the pieces.

Q: It's true that you've accumulated a lot of lullabies, but I think the variety in styles would be sufficient to keep your audience awake. Are there others you'd like to mention?

A: *Berceuse*, by David Vayo, which has whistling and humming. That one is the longest; he actually went beyond what I had asked for. But it was so haunting that I said, "I've got to do this." Sadly, my range of whistling is about an AT to AT [an octave] and he writes B to B. I have performed it a couple times in public, but for the recording I was joined by Orlando Cela.

Q: He whistles beautifully.

A: Yeah, he's a flutist. It was his first whistling job, so he was a bit nervous. He's good. Last May I had an opportunity to perform it with the composer and that was really neat. Still, it's really hard. I can barely sing and play, so ... Also, the piece is supposed to have an improvisatory feel, yet the rhythms are very precise, with double dots, lots of ties, syncopations, and odd meters. In a sense you have to learn it and then forget it before you can really get inside the music. I find that with a lot of new music.

Q: There are some vocal effects on the CD. Did Orlando do those as well?

A: I did the *shhh* and the *ahhh* from Vayo's *Berceuse* but I let Orlando do the humming and whistling.

Q: As music for flute and guitar is so popular I was wondering if you perform duets with Orlando.

A: We first worked together nine years ago when he conducted me in Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Romancero Gitano* for choir and guitar on Garcia Lorca texts, which was a beautiful experience. Since then we've done a couple of things, but the lullaby project brought us back together. Now we have some duo and

trio (with violin) concerts coming up this season. We're going to do some 19th-century trios, some tangos, and some Spanish music.

Q: How long have you been playing the guitar?

A: I started classical guitar when I was 16. I had played clarinet as a young boy and then electric guitar, at around 11. When I was 16 I saw a video in Spanish class of Segovia playing *Asturias* by Albéniz; the Doors quoted that piece in their *Spanish Caravan*, and I said, "Oh, that's the real thing." I didn't even know it was originally a piano piece.

Q: So many of the famous guitar works are transcriptions, but they sound so idiomatic on the guitar that it's easy to forget.

A: Yeah, well, Albéniz' piano patterns are straight out of flamenco, so in essence guitarists are just stealing it back. It's one of those great guitar pieces. So I went home, looked up the music, found it, and couldn't read much of it. But luckily a former concert guitarist was just hired to teach at the same school as my stepmother, so I started taking lessons. I played a concert about a year later with him in some duos.

Q: Sounds like you improved quickly!

A: I tried. I joke about it today because I loved the experience but I don't remember hitting many of the notes [laughs]. It was very neat. My first concert was at the Taber Opera House, in Leadville, Colorado, where Houdini had performed. It's the highest opera house in the world. Once I did that, I said, "Wow, this is what I want to do." And so I started practicing and practicing and went to Boston University for a year and then transferred to the New England Conservatory where I worked with David Leisner and then Eliot Fisk. During that time I also took flamenco lessons on the side with Juanito Pascual. When I graduated, suddenly it was, "Now what?" I began teaching and working and I got a job with Young Audiences, in Massachusetts, which took me into schools to give enrichment programs that are educational as well as entertaining, much like the Bernstein Young People's Concerts.

Then I met a Russian immigrant who was this amazing pedagogue. His name is Dmitri Goryachev. Juanito Pascual had taken lessons with him and I knew Dmitri's son, Grisha, who is an amazing virtuoso. I asked him, "Who taught you?" and he said, "My dad," so I went, took a lesson, and basically knew right away that this was the guy who could teach me. He taught me how to play the instrument and opened my ears and eyes to a lot so that I could really start applying what I felt that Eliot and David had been trying to teach me for years.

When I was 15 I had separated my shoulder playing rugby in high school and it hampered my playing greatly, so much so that it became an issue during my conservatory days. When I was 21 I met my future wife, who said she could fix it. She's a healer, and so she did.

Many people don't realize that musicians need to have really good bodies because we're involved in such a physically and mentally demanding exercise. The thing that we call music, if it were just two hours on stage, would be easy, but it's the four to five hours of daily practice ... it's the athletic part of the music that is so important. So my education has really reflected the totality of my experience, studies with Dmitri, working with flamenco dancers, collaborations with musicians of all kinds, continuing yoga and shiatsu therapy with my wife, Catherine, and of course, a good diet.

Q: Tell me a bit more about your concerts for young audiences or the enrichment programs. Are they the same thing?

A: Yes. Enrichment Programs/All-Ages/Young People's Concerts are all the same; it just depends on how the host wishes to bill them. I have two different programs that I tend to do. One is called *The Spirit of Spain* and the other is called *Latin Travels*, which allows me to keep the historical theme, how the music of Spain came over to the Americas with Columbus. I perform them solo, with flamenco dancer, or with flute or violin. I talk about language and the power of influence, and the underlying theme, which I don't tell the kids outright, is how we listen. I'll play some Tórroba, I play some Albéniz; it's not, let's say, difficult modern

music, but it is real and not “kids’ music.” I’ll have the kids going with the hemiolas. They grab ’em pretty quickly, I have to say. It’s very neat to see. Then I’ll play a couple of Brouwer pieces and it becomes a really nice experience for all of us.

With the *Latin Travels* I’ll play some Piazzolla; they love it when I knock on the guitar. I talk about timbre, rhythm, and what matters in the music. I’ve thought about putting in a lullaby but I’d probably choose a short one. I have to get a feeling for each audience, because with kids you have to be able to improvise in regards to pacing, content, etc. They tell you when you’re boring, most definitely!

Q: In the classical world, there’s constant speculation about how to go about building new audiences. Do you think your efforts will produce results?

A: Yeah, I do. Maybe I’m being brash about it, but what I’ve found is that in a lot of the places I’ve played, it’s not that people don’t like classical music, they just never hear it. I played a concert at a library last April in which about 80 percent of the audience were immigrants from Italy, Haiti, the Dominican Republic. These are not people who go to the New England Conservatory’s concerts, which was only about a mile away. They’re musical, you can see it when they walk down the street; they have music in their walk. One gentleman came up to me wanting to buy one of my CDs (I sell them at concerts). This was a demo disc with violin and guitar, *Diablo y Tango*. I wondered why he picked that one and he said that his son had heard a violin for the first time about two weeks earlier; he was 15 and said he wanted to take violin lessons.

I hear this repeatedly, people tell me things like, “I played death metal for the last five years, but I really like your kind of guitar.” Lack of exposure isn’t limited to low-income schools. They’ve cut the arts everywhere. I’ve taught at upper-upper-crust private schools where the students’ musical vocabulary is extremely small. But I’m encouraged because often people come up to me, sometimes years later, to tell me that they saw me perform and how much they enjoyed it.

I’m also optimistic because I remember being exposed to similar events and they certainly inspired me. My big thing is, I make sure that I’m not boring. It’s amazing how many people are surprised with that, because classical music gets pigeonholed as boring. The audience doesn’t know *Pictures at an Exhibition*, they don’t know about earth-shattering pieces like *The Rite of Spring*, or the Bartók *Music for Strings and Celeste*, which was used in *The Shining*, which they do know!

Q: Believe it or not, I’ve never seen the film.

A: Well, I’m from Colorado and it was filmed there, in Estes Park, which is just about an hour from my house, so we had to watch it [laughs]. Anyway, once these things are played for people the reaction is overwhelmingly positive.

Q: Have you considered doing transcriptions, either for guitar or chamber ensemble, to spread the word?

A: I love that size of ensemble. I’ve done the Adagio from Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* and some Piazzolla works in that way. I think it’s a great opportunity, a starting point. It plants a seed, but it can’t replace the magic of the concert hall.

Q: Well, Aaron, I’m convinced that your enthusiasm and virtuosity will entice listeners both old and young to experience that magic for themselves. I’ll look forward to your future projects and, of course, to hearing additional music that you’re sure to uncover in your mission as the pioneering lullaby hunter of the early 21st century.

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