

## **Vancouver Guitar Quartet**

Sunday, June 3, 8pm

Vancouver East Cultural

Centre

by Colin MacDonald

While it could be argued that the guitar is the instrument of popular choice for the twentieth century, the classical guitar retains an anachronistic character that seems more appropriate in a salon than a concert hall. The gentle intimacy of the Vancouver Guitar Quartet's sound suited the close seating of the Cultch, inviting you to slide your chair right next to the ensemble, and yet for all its delicacy, the playing never achieved any real passion. The nylon string guitar has long been associated with the music of Spain, and more recently with South America, but the fiery Latin soul was conspicuously absent from this very careful performance.

The Andalusian heritage was acknowledged in the *Suite Espanola* by Baroque composer Gaspar Sanz, a polite arrangement of folkloric melodies, before shifting the focus of the concert to Latin America. A pair of works by the Cuban composer/guitarist Leo Brouwer marked his position as one of the most interesting contemporary writers for the guitar. His *Cuban Landscape with Rain* painted in droplets and shimmering patterns of sound, while the *Toccata* challenged the ensemble to work together while playing independently, achieving the fantasy and improvisatory feel of the traditional toccata form.

The program included two world premieres, a testament to the Quartet's efforts to expand the classical guitar repertoire. Vancouver composer John Oliver wrote two delightful "colour pieces," marked by a postmodern sensitivity to popular sources, and a

tongue-in-cheek sense of humour. *Blue* transformed from a formal-sounding blues to a more exotic Moorish sound coloured by postminimal repetitions and altered scale patterns. The sounds of North American folk music emerged in *Yellow*, where familiar pentatonic melodies grooved in overlapping canonic patterns, occasionally accompanied by a rhythm section of hand taps on the guitar body. Oliver created music that was formal yet familiar sounding, giving a respectful nod to the popular idioms that are more obviously "guitar music."

Also commissioned by the Quartet, *Cinco Piezas Artesanales* by Argentinian composer Maximo Diego Pujol included a prominent melodic part for bassoon, played here by Jesse Read. Pujol's quasi-programmatic work represented particular urban scenes and locales, from a busy central plaza to a lonely alleyway to a steamy tango hall, and while incorporating elements of Argentine rhythms and *tango nuevo*, he avoided the levels of abstract expression familiar in the work of tango master Astor Piazzolla. The plaintive sound of the bassoon blended particularly well with the guitars, and the quartet had a chance to stretch their ensemble skills as the players alternated in duos and trios with the bassoon, as well as more accompanying roles.

More South American music rounded out the evening, with Vicente Sojo's *Venezuelan Popular Songs*. A musicologist, Sojo collected hundreds of folk songs, here arranged with gentle counterpoint that gave each of the Vancouver Guitar Quartet's members, Michael Strutt, David Sugars, Paul MacDermot, and Alan Rinehart, a chance to shine.