

# “Transmutations of the Classical Guitar in Contemporary Jazz through Experiment and Improvisation”

By Olaf Tarenskeen

## Preamble

My first classical guitar LP was *The Guitar History* of Alirio Diaz, LP from 1965, which contained the then most famous guitar hits like *Asturias*, *Recuerdos de Alhambra* and *Variations on a Theme from Mozart, Op. 9*. Played on a 70's turntable with Philips 2x9 Watt stereo set according to the then prevailing "hi-fi" standards: with mid frequency booming bass and the treble anything but brilliant. Nevertheless, the playing of Diaz and the South American pathos of V. Sojo and A. Lauro, the *Variations on a Theme from Mozart* by F. Sor, with the 16th triplet figuration at a high tempo, made a huge impression.

Looking back, I found similarities of this the Right Hand kinaesthetic in the Sor *Variation IV* with the guitar part of *Hindsight Hero*, track 7, *Blue Light*, album 2022: a reminiscence with this fragment. This pathos is one of the many components for the creation of further to be named *Transmutation* (TM), starting from the domain 'classical guitar'. Dealing with forces of foreignness (jazz) but keeping the classical guitar in mind.



Figure 1. Var. IV from the *Variations on a Theme from Mozart* F. Sor (1778 – 1839).



Figure 2. From *Hindsight Hero* trk 7. Guitar part arr. by O. Tarenskeen composition by Y. Smeets from CD *Blue Light* (2022).

The *Variation IV* as part of a genre that contrasts the almost 'nasal' vocal part and intervening 'hickup' guitar part of *Hindsight Hero*. Where timbres contrast but blend such as 'in blues this ideal has often been accomplished with the basic paring of guitar and voice'<sup>1</sup> and 'off beat' changes that

<sup>1</sup> Waksman, Steve, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.120.

dominates the jazz<sup>2</sup> is far from the pure tone of the classical guitar.

In the coming chapters I analyzed in detail a voice/guitar duo performance of the classic popular tune *Alone Together* for classicist harmonic prolongation and other analyses of more experimental conceived originals.

The retrospective element of this research, describing the path from the 70's to the present as a causal line from classical guitar to jazz, will be as curious as backwards from 2022 to the 70's. However, using my works, of which many preliminary studies and experiments applied in jazz ensembles or solo, from the 80's to the present (Chapter 3, Descriptive Analysis Former Works), an overview of a development is seen. This is outlined after the formal classical guitar training (from mainstream jazz to the current style) in which basics of Transmutations emerge sometimes sporadically, sometimes in micro moments, éphémère in interactions.

An impression through highlighted events of how this process went from *Var. IV* to arrive at "the same" instrument in contemporary jazz will be apparent in this study. Tempting to seek consistent causality but it seems to be more complex.

Let's take a global selection for the larger line between the 70's and 2022:

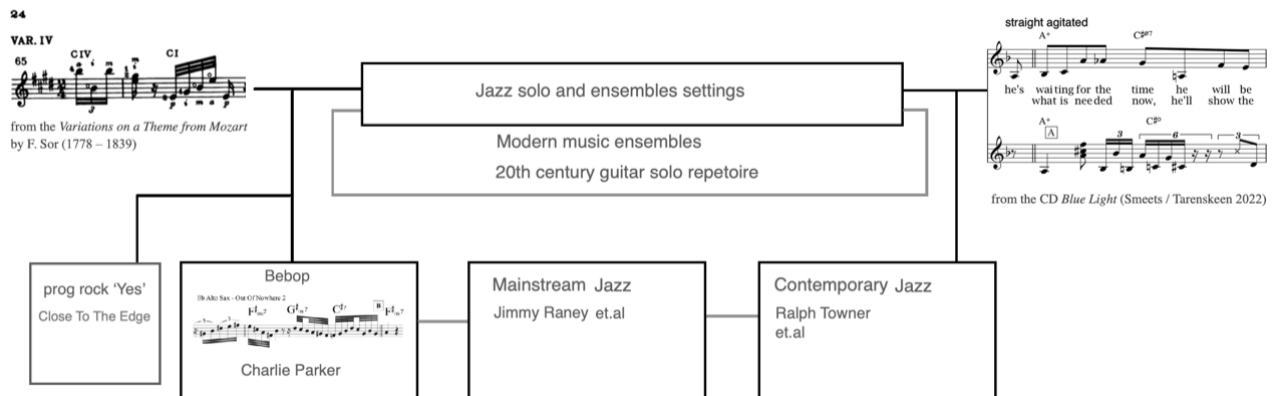


Figure 3.

A specific timeline of the professional field in which the dichotomy of performance activities in classical ensemble music (the 'contemporary notated music') and jazz ensembles/projects (ensemble /solo projects as a sideman or project leader) are found in later chapters.

There is a large number of nylon string guitarists in the spectrum of mainstream jazz on the

<sup>2</sup> Waksman 1999, p.38.

classical guitar, in the genre of solo arrangements ranging from the American songbook from the 50's to pop onwards thinking of Laurindo Almeida (1917- 1995), Luiz Bonfá (1922-2001), Bola Sete (1928-1987), João Gilberto (1931-2019) and Antonio Carlos Jobim (1927-1994), Bill Harris (1925-1988), Charlie Byrd (1925-1999), Gene Bertoncini, Ken Hatfield. In contemporary jazz solo and ensemble playing, players such as: Ralph Towner, Lionel Loueke, (Pat Metheny, with forays into the nylon string guitar), Nelson Veras, John Stowel, Lula Galvao, Sylvain Courtney<sup>3</sup>. Where in the latter group an amalgam element plays a role in the spectrum classical guitar and nylon string 'crossover' guitar.<sup>4</sup>

Solo playing (and setting duo playing) as an autonomous performance practice in the time span in question proved secondary in its exposition relative to a mainstream setting (not so much the intended style). Playing opportunities are marginal and often directed to the Guitar Festival, a separate category for inviting the guitar enthusiast, aficionado, extended with an expo of guitars and gadgets, often with a financial infrastructure based on popular artists from the finger-picking genre on the one hand or the classical guitar on the other. Oddly enough, the mixed form of these is common. Or, in addition the performances self-organized renting a stage and setting up merchandise (similar to the "production and distribution" construction described in Chapter 3 but for performance). Exceptions exists related to trends or record company bound (there seemed to be a rise of chamber music-like jazz settings at the ECM label) international acts such as the duo settings of the above mentioned Ralph Towner with Gary Burton, Jan Garbarek, John Abercrombie, Gary Peacock, Paulo Fresu (ECM) from the 70's on. But likewise with Pat Metheny (on nylon string guitar) and Charlie Haden in the 90's (CD-Missouri Sky, 1997). Other experiments with different settings than the jazz band took place from the 80's in the 'down town' music scene NY with John Zorn as the leader of 'controlled improvisation' style. Similar streams appeared in the improvised music scene of the Netherlands but is beyond the scope of this research.

My analytical-theoretical response here mirrors the musicians above also by studying there way of playing to internalize style ideas, timbral-textural elements, broadening tonality as the point of breaking free from the paradigm of mainstream jazz and art music. Several of the above-mentioned artists came out of a traditional musical education, ongoing experience performing, educating contemporary jazz. In this study it is apparent that specific features of the classical guitar e.g., also the Motion features (RH techniques, see Chapter I, Descriptive Analysis Former Works), influence

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3 To add: Peter Sprague, Jamey Findlay, Fareed Hage, Ference Snetberger.

4 A hybrid model of a classical full acoustic and semi-hollow body electric guitar.

the sound of jazz (such as the quoted fragment of the *Mozart variation* by F. Sor). In a few fragments of my own music, I made the specific link with such as occur in the classical repertoire.<sup>5</sup> My aim is to uncover some of the academic language of romantic or 20th-century guitar works and how this is transformed and incorporated in this jazz music on which the question arises:

‘How do melody, harmony, and rhythm contribute to the essential polyphonic character and style of transmutation in contemporary jazz by the classical guitar and its performance techniques in musical practice, ultimately leading to a new and recognizable individualistic style of playing jazz on a classical guitar?’

So how was this brought together into a conceivable narrative?

First, a Former Works analysis is presented, based on a thematic repertoire overview<sup>6</sup> (Thematic Catalogue), which motivates my choices that led to the question of this research into transmutation of the classical guitar in contemporary jazz. Second, an extensive analysis of three different live performances and third: the reception of listener c.q. music journalist in 52 reviews and by a questionnaire involving 14 recipients, described in the ASPR, an Analysis Structure of Public Reception is presented. To close, a LISH-table (Listen Instructions Structural Hearing) is added as a checklist for 126 compositions and arrangements (written between 1984 -2022) of the most significant features of Transmutation from the Former Works. LISH can play a role in registration of recognizable Transmutation aspects in live performance and audio recordings: what happens where and when, which is the evidence for the final conclusion.

The analyses of my work (in threefold explained in the next chapter) advised by musicologist and guitarist Dr. Ari van Vliet, sensitized me to a static and dynamic quality in this music. Specifically, through combined schemes, analyse tables, which I found suited my own concern for the simple premises overarching and governing the development of my music.

The purpose of two analyse tables was to find the useful place for pitch, rhythm and sound sets and their analysis, and to establish the combinations of these as the more satisfactory and overarching analytical tool.

The ordering principle at work here are the IDSAI (Identification System Analysis Items) and the DSIE (Description System of Interaction Events) tables as taxonomy of different characteristics items in qualities and corresponding numbers for characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> In many cases it is a translation of a band or string instruments or the piano (*'pianistic voicing's'*).

<sup>6</sup> Thematic Catalogue of 126 Incipits, see appendix.

For the live performances I chose the whole analytical design of Form, Melodic contour, Harmony, Rhythm, Expression and Motion to give me largely the same information as the played music (score) itself does briefly. The two systems, IDSAI and DSIE make a manageable way of seeing aesthetic patterns briefly since the use of repeating recognisable characteristics are connected to the same numbers from the LISH table.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Peter van Bergen and Studio LOOS - The Hague and the Municipality of The Hague, for willingness to facilitating and share knowledge which have been invaluable for the start and progress of this research project. To Dr. Ari van Vliet for his invaluable guidance, support, and mentorship throughout the course of my research. His expertise, insightful feedback, have been instrumental in shaping this work. Additionally, I am deeply thankful to my classical and jazz teachers, Antonio Pereira Arias, Peter Nieuwerf, Kevin Eubanks, and numerous others who have inspired me to pursue excellence in my musical endeavors. Their teachings have not only enriched my understanding of music, but also shaped my understanding and appreciation of both genres.

Furthermore, I extend my appreciation to the musicians who contributed performances to this research, including Yvonne Smeets, Tineke Postma, Gijs Idema and Cas Jiskoot. Their talent, dedication, and collaboration have enriched the musical aspects of this project, bringing depth and authenticity to its exploration. Their willingness to lend knowledge and skills, artistic sensibilities and unique contributions they have made. Also, my gratitude goes to all the respondents who generously contributed time, insights, and expertise to the questionnaire of this research. Their valuable input has been essential in the findings and conclusions of this study. Thank you for your precious contributions. Special thanks to Arno, Esko, Huub, Herman for additional feedback.

Last, I would like to express my gratitude to my wife, Meertine Laansma, for tireless assistance in administrative tasks related to the textual aspects of the research. Her unwavering support and encouragement have been a constant source of strength throughout this endeavor. I am truly fortunate to have been surrounded by such supportive individuals who have played integral roles in the realization of this research.

Olaf Tarenskeen, The Hague, May 8, 2024

## **Abstract**

Artistic research on the integration of sound and style in contemporary music and jazz, presented in an improvisational context. In this essay, transmutations are an addition to composing and arranging music for guitar solo, improvising in jazz settings resulting in a cohesive style that bridges the boundaries of genres in themselves and in popular music. The initial question leading to this research, the course of the analysis itself and the outcome of the analysis, research and interpretation in the conclusion is described in essays. These are accompanied with a lecture-recital on video as an overall view, in a live demonstration by the author, performer guitarist; a Former Works overview of the guitarist's works, analysis of Public Reception containing: reviews, a questionnaire and Listening Instruction for Structural Hearing.

*Keywords:* Transmutations, Improvisation, Jazz Guitar, Classical Guitar, Contemporary Music, Jazz, Third Stream.

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Thematic Catalogue: 126 Incipits of the works numbered.

List of Reviews 1 and 2 - overview highlighted:	35 reviews - solo/CD's.
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List of Reviews 3 and 4 - overview total:	52 reviews original text

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Bibliography

## Part I

# Towards the concept of Transmutation

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