

Troubadours

by John Corigliano

For me, the compositional process starts well before the generation of actual musical ideas.

Troubadours began with guitarist Sharon Isbin nearly 13 years ago. At that time, she asked if I would write her a concerto, and I was decidedly lukewarm about the idea. The challenges of writing for a highly idiomatic instrument that I didn't fully understand were augmented by my dislike of most "idiomatic" guitar music, as well, as my fear of writing a concerto for an inherently delicate instrument.

But Sharon persisted. She sent me scores, tapes and letters with ideas on the kind of concerto it could be. When I received a letter from her some years ago with articles about the age of the troubadours, and particularly some celebrated women troubadours, I started thinking about the idea of serenading and of song. Slowly the conception of a troubadour concerto began to form.

During this process the crystallization of what I love most about the guitar took place: it is an instrument that has always been used to speak directly to an audience. Lyrical, direct, and introspective, it has a natural innocence about it that has attracted amateurs and professionals, young and old.

It is very hard to preserve this sense of innocence in the music world we live in. Performers are held to razor-sharp recording standards as they compete with each other for superstardom. Composers have such arsenals of techniques from the past, present, and other cultures, that the idea of true simplicity (in contrast to chic simple-mindedness) is mistrusted and scorned. So the idea of a guitar concerto was, for me, like a nostalgic return to all the feelings I had when I started composing—before the commissions and deadlines and reviews. A time when discovery and optimistic enthusiasm ruled my senses.

Therefore, *Troubadours* is a lyrical concerto. It does not "storm the heavens," and its type of virtuosity is quite different from that of my other concertos. By writing for chamber orchestra, with some of the instruments placed offstage, I was able to achieve the balance I desired between soloist and orchestra.

"Troubadour" was the name given to the poet-musicians of southern France whose art flourished from the end of the 11th century until the end of the 13th century. While this work utilizes some of the flavor of that time in the solo writing and percussion, it is more concerned with the idea of the troubadour rather than a display of early techniques.

The concerto is a series of free variations on an original troubadour-like melody. The last phrase of this melody, however, is an actual quote of the final phrase of the song *A chantar* by La Comtessa (Beatritz) de Dia (late 12th century). *Troubadours* is in three parts, with a cadenza separating the second and third part. The outer sections are slow, the central one fast. The main theme resembles many troubadour tunes in that it is basically stepwise and revolves around two tonal centers each a step apart. This stepwise descending melody forms the building blocks of seven chromatic chords that run through the work. These chords first appear in string harmonics, fading in and out of nothingness. They soon dissolve into each other as a background for a series of descending lines in the oboe, violins, clarinets, and flutes.

These variants of the troubadour tune float slowly downward surrounded by the cloudy chords. The solo guitar fades in and out with fragments of its theme, as if from a distance. The downward lines finally disappear, and the soloist is left alone to play the central troubadour theme. The orchestra slowly joins the soloist in lyrical variations as the cloudy harmonies return.

The second section is announced by an offstage percussionist. (One of the two onstage players has gone backstage to join an oboe and two bassoons.) This trio of double-reeds and drums acts as a raucous shawm band. (Shawms were ancestors of oboes and bassoons —much reedier and coarser than today's refined instruments.) The band interrupts the onstage soloist and orchestra in a series of multiple conversations, and as they reach a peak, two offstage French horns add to the interplay. This cacophonous climax is followed by an extended solo cadenza in which the guitarist changes the mood from boisterous to intimate. At the very end of the cadenza, the guitar introduces a slow, ornamented variation of the troubadour tune accompanied by a simple chaconne-like seven-chord progression again derived from the descending note pattern of the theme. This pattern repeats as the orchestra slowly joins the soloist, but the seven-note chaconne progression begins to change into the original chromatic cloud-chords as the more abstract descending variations of oboe, clarinets, violins, and flutes float downward and the opening textures return. This slow change from the innocent harmonies and lines that started at the end of the cadenza to the more abstract hazy filigrees and sonorities that opened the work is possible only because they are generated from the same ingredients. The change is not one of material or technique, but one of attitude. The innocence of the earlier chaconne is gone, replaced by another kind of expression. The loss of one is balanced by another.

Troubadours ends as it began, in clouds of memory.

-- John Corigliano