

The Electric Guitar in Contemporary Art Music: Cultural Synthesis and Genre Crossing

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Abstract:

Delving into the electric guitar's journey from pop and rock foundations to a prominent role in art music, the text underscores the instrument's contribution to genre fusion and cultural translation. Through composer interviews and case studies, it uncovers the guitar's evolving identity, underscoring its technical and expressive dynamism and its transformative influence on modern composition. A curated Spotify playlist accompanies the analysis, illustrating the instrument's musical versatility, marking a shift towards artistic liberation and the melding of classical and popular music to enrich the cultural soundscape.

<1> Crossing Musical Boundaries: The Electric Guitar's Role in Uniting Genres

In the dynamic unfolding of the 1980s, I witnessed a fascinating shift as classically trained composers began to actively dismantle the once-rigid boundaries separating 'cultured' music from popular genres. They set aside the exclusive aesthetic ideals of the avant-garde, instead choosing to create works that resonated with the cultural pulse of their era. The electric guitar, deeply entrenched in the roots of pop and rock culture, assumed an emblematic role in this transition, serving as a symbol of artistic liberation and intellectual freedom. Today, modern composers continue this legacy, seamlessly incorporating the electric guitar into their compositions, thus marrying the sophistication of art music with the visceral appeal of popular music. This amalgamation reflects a significant cultural transition, with contemporary musicians frequently traversing genres, advocating for versatility and inclusivity in their creative expressions.

In support of my research into this cultural and musical fusion, I have curated a Spotify playlist [1]. This collection of selected works exemplifies the electric guitar's journey through various musical landscapes, emphasizing its capacity to function not just as an instrument, but as a medium of cultural translation and transformation. Through this playlist, listeners can experience firsthand the evolution of the electric guitar from a rock-centric tool to a refined vehicle for contemporary classical expression. This not only showcases the instrument's rich history and versatility but also provides a sonic companion to the academic discourse

presented in this paper. The electric guitar, once confined to the background of popular culture, now takes center stage in the world of art music, its strings resonating with the collective voice of an era that champions the fusion of musical worlds.

<2> **Blurring the Lines: The Electric Guitar's Role in Genre Synthesis**

Since the 1990s, the electric guitar has become increasingly prominent in contemporary art music, achieving a status comparable to classical instruments, and often featuring as a solo instrument within ensembles. Composers from the last two decades of the 20th century onwards have incorporated the electric guitar into their works, capitalizing on the instrument's tonal range and the technical capabilities demonstrated by rock guitarists. They have created new and distinctive sounds by combining traditional playing techniques with rock-specific effects and distortions. The previous need to differentiate the electric guitar from its associations with pop culture has diminished. This evolution is reflected in conversations such as the one led by John Cage with Morton Feldman in 1966, which investigated alternative sound production methods while Feldman was approaching to write *A possibility for a work for electric guitar* (1966). Feldman noted, "When it didn't sound like an electric guitar, I wrote it down" [2]. Twenty years later, the desire to disassociate from rock music was still present, even though it was not entirely evident in music as in the case of Tristan Murail who expressed his distance from rock music in a BBC interview, stating, "I don't know much about it [rock music] and I'm afraid I don't like it very much" [3]. However, Murail's stated disinterest in and lack of knowledge about rock music is surprising, considering his documented engagement with the genre in the piece *vampyr!* (1984), as noted by Jamenson [4].

In the evolving landscape of contemporary music, the electric guitar has emerged as a key element in the vocabulary of new-generation composers, signaling a departure from the philosophies of earlier figures such as Morton Feldman, who advocated for a clear separation between art music and the conventional sounds of the electric guitar. This historical perspective, which once prioritized rhythmic aperiodicity, systematic dissonance, and the exploration of non-traditional sounds, is giving way to a new paradigm. Current composers are not just incorporating, but actively seeking to legitimize the timbres, and in some cases, the rhythms and motifs that are emblematic of iconic rock and metal guitarists. I have had the privilege of conversing with prominent composers such as Tim Brady, Claude Ledoux, Fausto Taglietti, Marco Oppedisano, and Dai Fujikura, during which I discovered their

profound knowledge not only of classical music but also of rock music. Despite their primary association with contemporary classical compositions, their insights into the realm of rock music were equally impressive. These composers exemplify the contemporary trend to harness the electric guitar's full technical and expressive potential, drawing from its rich heritage in Rock and Heavy metal. They do not shy away from the instrument's association with popular genres but instead celebrate and elevate it within the context of art music. This approach does not merely borrow from the language of rock; it recontextualizes it, creating a dialogue between the virtuosity of famed guitarists and the sophisticated textures of modern composition.

The foundational influence of the guitar backgrounds possessed by classically trained composers has been pivotal in the synthesis of popular and classical music genres. The electric guitar emerged as a vital connective element, bridging the gap between these two seemingly disparate sonic realms. Composers of the post-World War II generation were immersed in pop/rock culture. Whether through active participation in rock bands during their formative years or as avid listeners of rock music, the imprints of their musical upbringing are discernible in their compositional works. The explicit references to pop/rock culture are conspicuous within the contemporary classical repertoire, and it was with the cohort of composers who matured alongside guitar-centric pop/rock that the genuine integration of the guitar into the classical domain was realized.

<3> Case Studies in Genre Fusion: Composers' Dialogues with Rock Music

Building on this evolution, in 1976, Rhys Chatham, classically trained flutist, found inspiration in the dynamic punk scene at CBGBs in New York. This immersion into punk culture significantly influenced his musical direction, culminating in his seminal work *Guitar Trio* (1977). Characterized by its relentless strumming and open tuning with high distortion, the piece uses rhythmic persistence to allow the harmonic overtones, typical of rock music, to resonate—as noted by Fox in 2016[5]. This simplicity of form yet intricacy of sound laid the groundwork for further explorations within this genre. Glenn Branca, who worked closely with Chatham, would later extrapolate these concepts into his monumental symphonies for electric guitar orchestras, pushing the textural and harmonic boundaries of massed guitars. This approach is epitomized in his Symphony No. 13, titled *Hallucination City* [6] where he employs an ensemble consisting of 91 guitars. Branca's work not only expanded the scope of electric guitar music but also paved the way for other composers like the Canadian guitarist

and composer Tim Brady, who has been at the forefront of compositions for electric guitar ensembles. The famous Brady's work *100 questions, 100 réponses for 100 guitars* (2016) is a notable example, blending the talents of 20 professional musicians with 80 amateurs, thus eroding the boundaries between avant-garde music and the public [7].

The strategy pioneered by Chatham, familiar in classical music, involves the abstraction of a folk instrument from its traditional cultural connotations, focusing instead on its core acoustic properties. This approach is continued by contemporary composers, as seen in Dai Fujikura's work *Abandoned Time* [8], scored specifically for rock guitar and ensemble. The electric guitar in this concerto adopts a tone deeply influenced by distortion, employing a range of effects and techniques that recall the groundbreaking styles of guitarists such as the tapping of Van Halen, the bending of Slash and the virtuosity of Randy Rhoads. During a personal conversation with me, Dai Fujikura expressed his own exposure to and affinity for these musicians during his college years in London in February 2021 Dai Fujikura's expresses his own exposure and affinity to these musicians during his college years in London manifest in the concerto's tribute to the rock guitar genre. Composer's personal encounters with rock music markedly shape the concerto's aesthetic, merging his formal compositional education with the energetic and technical aspects of the rock genre that enthralled him in his early years.

The permeation of rock music into the electric guitar's repertoire within the cultivated sphere of art music extends beyond its collaborative role in ensemble pieces to its assertive presence in solo compositions. This phenomenon is not merely an incidental trend but a deliberate incorporation of the electric guitar's versatility and expressive potential. For instance, the composition by Fausto Romitelli, intriguingly titled *Trash TV Trance* [9], reflects the cultural zeitgeist of the early 2000s, serving as a nod to the pervasive influence of television culture. Dismissing the palpable rock elements embedded within *Trash TV Trance* would impose an artificial ideological boundary, ostensibly to preserve the sanctity of highbrow music. However, such a demarcation fails to acknowledge the genuine artistic merits and cross-genre dialogues that this piece exemplifies. The initial fast-paced rhythm and the frequently used progression of quartal chords in rock pose an evocative question regarding the origins of influence and the authenticity of stylistic borrowings. Furthermore, the piece employs aggressive, distorted sonorities that are emblematic of heavy metal guitar techniques, thereby challenging traditional auditory aesthetics and inviting listeners into a realm where the raw energy of rock coalesces with the conceptual rigor of contemporary classical composition.

This intersection crafts a sonic landscape where the electric guitar is not merely an interloper but a legitimate and eloquent voice in the concert hall.

At times, composers explicitly express a desire to convey their affiliation with the rock music scene to the listener, obviating the need for ambiguity. In such instances, composers may integrate elements from popular genres into their compositions, a phenomenon that can be inferred from the work's title. An illustrative instance of this approach is evident in Steven Mackey's composition titled "Grungy," wherein elements emblematic of the grunge genre are incorporated, thus highlighting the composer's deliberate association with rock music culture *Grungy* [10]. This piece serves as an academic yet visceral tribute to the grunge movement of the 1990s. The title alone immediately alludes to the grunge era, preparing the listener for a dive into the characteristic soundscapes of the genre. Mackey harnesses the electric guitar to navigate a realm of distortion and chorus, emulating the practices of grunge and punk-garage guitarists who shaped the sound of the '90s. The robust and commanding phrases, along with the cacophony they produce, are reminiscent of the revolutionary impact these sounds had on the rock music landscape. In *Grungy*, Mackey does not simply mimic the sound of an era; he reimagines it through the sophisticated lens of contemporary classical music. The piece's exploration of gritty textures and dynamic expressions is both a nod to and an expansion of the raw energy that defined grunge. Mackey's composition is a conversation between the raw, emotive power of popular music and the intricate, thoughtful constructs of art music, showcasing the enduring versatility and expressive capacity of the electric guitar.

In a similar vein, "Rocking Up" [11] showcases a genre-bending journey that reflects his classical academic prowess and his admiration for legendary jazz-rock guitarists. Among those he acknowledges—though this is not a comprehensive list—are icons such as Jimi Hendrix, David Torn, Bill Frisell, Frank Zappa, David Gilmour, B.B. King, Thurston Moore, and Robert Fripp. The evocative title "Rocking Up" aptly encapsulates the essence of this cross-genre exploration. The piece appears to recount the history of rock music in a span of ten minutes. The first section, characterized by clean guitar (that is, without distortion) with the use of slap techniques and aperiodic, jazzy rhythms, transitions into a slow and reflective part that increasingly gains momentum with the use of strumming. This lays the foundation for a subsequent heavily distorted segment characterized by a persistent rock riff with repeated notes typical of heavy metal riffs, leading into the final section which unfolds slowly and evocatively. Here, the modal and polyphonic textures gradually explore the contrapuntal possibilities afforded by the use of delay. The effect is adeptly utilized within the piece,

creating closely spaced echoes with three repetitions, set against a backdrop of protracted reverberation. This generates a canon-like allure reminiscent of Pink Floyd's experimental sound and the distinctive guitar work of David Gilmour, illustrating the potential of modern classical compositions to encapsulate the essence of rock through a sophisticated academic lens.

Continuing my investigation into the electric guitar's versatility in the fusion of art and popular music genres, Claude Ledoux's *Zap's init* [12] boldly transcends mere imitation of rock's linguistic conventions, delving into its more sophisticated and scientific structures. With the academic rigor typical of a fine and cultured composer, Ledoux conducts an in-depth exploration of the technical and expressive capabilities of the electric guitar. He adeptly utilizes tools such as a vibrato lever, an octaver pedal, a wah-wah, and an expression pedal to modulate levels of distortion, and an e-bow to articulate the score's finest technical and sonic intentions with precision. Every aspect of Ledoux's composition is meticulously calculated—from the range of effects to the manner of note articulation. Phrases develop through juxtaposition, each gripping and originating from the authentic essence of rock. Sometimes underscored by the robust sound of the octaver, other times unravelling through virtuosic scales and incisive power chords, *Zap's init* stands as a testament to the nuanced intersection where the authenticity of rock and the craftsmanship of classical guitar composition meet.

Building upon the previous discussion on merging popular and art music through the electric guitar, I must highlight Marco Oppedisano's noteworthy contribution with his composition, *Urban Mosaic* [13]. This piece unfolds in four movements, illustrating the seamless integration of rock elements throughout, especially pronounced in the third movement. In this part, I observe the electric guitar taking a commanding role, shifting between virtuosic exhibitions and serene interludes. Moreover, this movement introduces sequences that subtly nod to neoclassical music, reminiscent of the stylistic nuances associated with the virtuoso guitarist Yngwie Malmsteen. My analysis of Oppedisano's work reveals a deliberate fusion of contemporary rock and classical music, emphasizing his capability to bridge these diverse musical traditions through the electric guitar. This approach not only showcases sophisticated musical craftsmanship but also serves as a testament to the electric guitar's versatility as a conduit between contrasting musical landscapes.

<4> The Electric Guitarist Evolves: From Pop Culture to Concert Halls

The figure of the electric guitarist also changes. He is no longer identified exclusively in the field of popular music. The difficulties often encountered in the 1970s of finding an electric guitarist who could read a score sufficiently well and follow an orchestra conductor are now a thing of the past. Very talented performers are born, often recipients of relevant compositions. Classical guitarists such as Tom Pauwels (dedicatee of Romitelli's piece), Seth Josel guitarist and researcher (author of the reconstruction of Morton Feldmann's piece) Yaron Deutsch to whom many pieces are dedicated. These are just a few examples of the wide range of performers offered by today's music scene. The relationship between the guitarist and the composer becomes systematic and fundamental, and it is the performers who commission new works offering their indispensable collaboration.

Contemporary ensembles are also born in which the electric guitar is a stable instrument. Among the many formations that stand out, the *Bang on a Can All-stars*, defined by the New York times as a “fiercely aggressive group, combining the power and punch of a rock band with the precision and clarity of a chamber ensemble” [11]. Since 1991 guitarist James Woodrow has been a leading member of *Icebreaker*, an English ensemble dedicated to contemporary repertoire. Daryl Buckley, is the artistic director of the Australian formation Elision. Particular attention is paid to the electric guitar by the prominent exponents of French spectralism, creators of the ensembles *L'itinéraire*, among whose founders we find Hugues Dufort, Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, that used the instrument in their compositions.

<5> Conclusion

As the distinction between high art and popular culture continues to blur, it becomes increasingly essential to recognize the contributions of Rock to the evolution of music. The techniques, timbres, and emotive power pioneered by metal guitarists have afforded the electric guitar a unique place in the classical repertoire. This cross-pollination has led to a richer, more diverse musical landscape, where the electric guitar is not just present but is a prominent, dynamic voice. The rich heritage in rock, has become an emblematic feature of modern classical music, symbolizing a bridge between two worlds that were once considered irreconcilable. Contemporary composers are not just borrowing from the lexicon of Rock; they are actively engaging with it, crafting compositions that are as sophisticated and nuanced

as they are visceral and bold. In this way, the electric guitar continues to redefine its role, offering new avenues for musical exploration and expression within the classical tradition.

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Bibliographical information

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