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# All Hail Benjamin Verdery

FESTIVAL OF NEW AMERICAN MUSIC

BY SCOTT CMIEL

The Festival of New American Music at Sacramento State University is a eclectic, 10-day event that features a wide range of nationally known artists, including, among others, Augusta Read Thomas, the JACK Quartet, Third Coast Percussion, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. On Tuesday, the artist elected to perform was guitarist Benjamin Verdery, whose career should be colored red, white, and blue because it has been so associated with music by American composers and because he displays an open, democratic attitude about what type of music is suitable for a classical guitar program.



Verdery dedicated the concert to the memory of Elliott Carter, the great American composer who died the previous day, and performed works written by his colleagues at the Yale School of Music, inspired by a student now known for his work in the rock group The National, and made popular by icons Elvis Presley, Prince, and Jimi Hendrix.

The guitar is sometimes faulted for having a repertoire that fails to include the most important voices in contemporary composition, but Verdery began the concert with music written for him by three widely acclaimed living composers, Martin Bresnick, Ezra Laderman, and Ingram Marshall. Bresnick's *Joaquin Is Dreaming* is dedicated to the composer's newly born grandson and explores the child's wonderfully complex human

inheritance (American, Ecuadorean, Jewish, Catholic, Russian, German, Spanish, native South American, and more). Bresnick's inspired score reflects, in a musical way, on this wonderful new person and his intricate place in a brave new world. Verdery's expressive performance of the three-movement work perfectly captured the depth of Joaquin's rich family legacy, the exciting possibilities of his future life, and his incontestably beautiful and poetic present.

*On Vineyard Sound*, by Laderman, is a work in four movements that portrays the composer's beloved home in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Verdery gave a passionate account of the intricate and fervent first, third, and fourth movements, with the asymmetric rasgueado chords of the third movement being particularly striking. The introspective second movement was full of ornate ornamentation that was always expressively performed. Laderman has a distinct compositional voice and a command of the guitar that is impressive.

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## Digital Delay Teaches Patience

Marshall's *Soepa* is for an amplified classical guitar that uses digital delay in the first and third movements and looping in the middle movement. *Soepa* is the Tibetan word for *patience*, and Marshall's work is a meditation on the teachings of the Dalai Lama on the importance of patience and compassion. The first movement uses a digital delay effect at a rate of about two pulses per second, initially to create a feeling of stress and anxiety and then to take us through a kaleidoscopically changing series of emotional states. The second movement, at the heart of the piece, features a lovely, arpeggiated chord progression, a peaceful melody, ethereal tremolo ornamentation, and more — each segment extended with looping, layered on top of the previous material and culminating in the combinations creating a glorious, pulsing whole. The final movement again used digital delay to create an exciting and sumptuous sonic environment. The entire work made manipulating electronic effects into a new kind of virtuosity of which Verdery proved himself a master.

*Now and Ever* is a two-movement work by Verdery himself that employs an alternate tuning for the guitar and makes the dissonant interval of a minor second the most expressive part of a sorrowful, angry, but ultimately hopeful work that contemplates the tragedy of repressed peoples throughout history. The composer/artist's command of the changing meters gave the work great vitality, while his beautiful tone perfectly complemented the hopeful conclusion.

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The recital ended with several works that highlighted Benjamin Verdery's interest in popular music. *The National Anthem* was not an arrangement of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which may have been most appropriate on election night, but rather an original composition for electric guitar and tape by Jack Vees that used processed sound clips from the album *High Violet*, by the rock band The National. (Bryce Dessner, one of Verdery's former students, is the band's guitarist.) This provided a richly resonant backdrop for melodies composed for electric guitar and an improvised guitar solo. Finally, Verdery's signature arrangements of "Three American Songs" — Don't Be Cruel by Elvis Presley, Kiss by Prince, and Purple Haze by Jimi Hendrix - left the audience with a happy, patriotic glow.