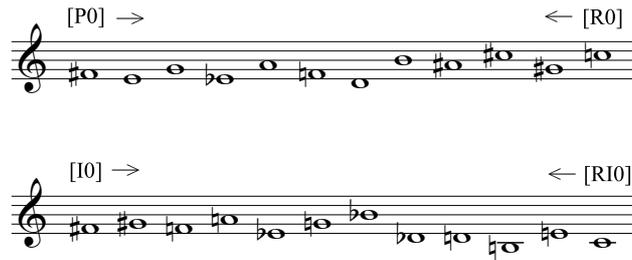


A note regarding Fig 1 erratum in the published Soundboard article.

This article, which was published *Soundboard* Vol 42, No. 3 (2016), contains an error as regards the Figure 1 note row example, which actually refers to a different work (ApIvor's Concertino Op. 26 for Guitar and Orchestra), rather than the note row used in the Variations Op. 29. The correct note row for Figure 1 is shown below:



Mark Marrington, March 2017

DENIS APIVOR'S VARIATIONS, OP. 29: Introduction to the Guitar Music of a Pioneering British Modernist

By Mark Marrington

Denis ApIvor's suite of nine short pieces, the *Variations for Solo Guitar*, Op. 29, provides an excellent introduction to his classical guitar music, as well as a technically approachable means by which the interested performer can begin to immerse in his sound world. In this article I will discuss the musical characteristics of the *Variations* in some detail, highlighting certain aspects of interest in the compositional process, as well as situate the music contextually in relation to the postwar evolution of 20th-century British guitar repertoire. Before considering the pieces themselves, it will be useful to provide some general background information on ApIvor and his association with the guitar.¹

Denis ApIvor (1916–2004) was a multifaceted musician whose work often defies easy categorization. Aside from a brief period of full-time activity composing for the theatre during the early 1950s, ApIvor's chief profession was medicine (he trained as an anesthesiologist), which naturally engendered a certain distance from the music establishment. This caused him to compose without recourse to the musical dictates of the time and his stylistic decisions were, as a result, in and out of step with developments in British music. Much of ApIvor's music is in fact remarkable for its drawing not so much upon compositional trends for inspiration, as on extra-musical sources, especially literature and art, and most notably the dramatic works of Federico García Lorca, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, and the visual art of Paul Klee.

While ApIvor's early output can be related stylistically to the prewar Warlock-Delius tradition of English music, particularly in reference to his songs of the 1930s and '40s, he was also an important exponent of European modernist composition at a time when British composers were rather more insular than they are today. In these terms he is usually associated with a small circle of like-minded contemporaries, composers Humphrey Searle (1915–82) and Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–83), along with whom he pioneered the exploration of serial techniques during the 1940s. ApIvor's public career reached its peak during the mid-1950s, beginning with his breakthrough following

the successful BBC broadcast in 1950 of his adventurous choral-orchestral setting of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (itself composed a decade earlier in 1939). He then made his reputation as a composer for the stage, receiving several commissions from the Royal Ballet, of which the most successful was his adaptation of Lorca's play *Blood Wedding* (1953). ApIvor continued to secure commissions and broadcasts of his orchestral and chamber music through the BBC during the 1960s and '70s (benefitting from the pro-modernist William Glock climate in particular), but by the mid-1980s his work was falling into obscurity. Since the late 1990s, however, there has been a steady revival of interest in ApIvor's music, marked in particular by an increased frequency of public performances of his smaller chamber and vocal works.

ApIvor's contribution to the British guitar repertoire was characterized by a breadth of output unusual for a non-guitarist composer. The only comparable British exception is his younger contemporary, Peter Maxwell Davies. Over the course of his career he explored the guitar's use in a wide range of solo and ensemble contexts, developing a considerable facility in composing for the instrument and deep appreciation of its capabilities. ApIvor's introduction to the guitar came via Spanish music and occurred early in his career through his friendship with lutenist and Dowland scholar Diana Poulton, whom he met in 1938 in Sussex. Poulton, who was then an important figure in the Haslemere early music scene, introduced ApIvor to the vihuela literature, which she played for him. She also played ApIvor authentic recordings of the Andalusian *cante jondo* or "deep song." The unique sound of *cante jondo*, with its drones and repetitive rhythmic patterns, was to influence much of ApIvor's later work and is certainly felt in a number of his guitar pieces.²

ApIvor began writing for the guitar some years before Julian Bream's campaign for repertoire had gathered momentum, although his first major work, the *Concertino for Guitar and Orchestra*, Op. 26 (1954), was certainly composed with Bream in mind. His earliest guitar pieces, which have not survived, were written in 1950 to accompany

¹ For a more in-depth study of ApIvor and his music, see Mark Marrington, "Extra-musical Influences and Musical Style in the Works of Denis ApIvor," PhD diss. (University of Leeds, 2002).

² Spanish character is particularly prominent in ApIvor's two sets of songs for voice and piano on poetry texts by Lorca; the earlier, *Seis Canciones*, Op. 8, was later arranged for guitar and voice (see [List of Works](#) below).

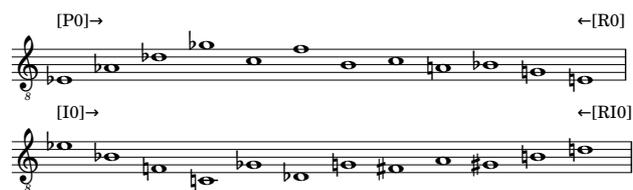
a dramatic reading of William Blake's *An Island in the Moon*.³ While composing this music, ApIvor undertook a course of lessons with poet and guitarist John Roberts, enabling him to gain a basic knowledge of the fingerboard and the capabilities of the instrument.⁴ This was ApIvor's only formal education on guitar, and he never learned the instrument to a performance standard, commenting that "I was no good, but over the years I've studied it and I know the fingerboard and what the instrument can do."⁵ It is clear from a survey of his output over the years that with each new work ApIvor's understanding of the guitar's sonic possibilities nonetheless increased, as did his appreciation of the instrument's technical peculiarities:

Over the years I have found no reason to modify my opinion as to the difficulty of classical guitar playing... The combination of the barré and multiple stopping is almost insuperable; and physiologically the instrument is an impossible anachronism since it requires the hand to be most active in its weakest part, while the strong part is immobilized in the barré. Added to this, the strings are so close that multiple chording is exceedingly difficult to bring off and the right hand has, of course, a technique of great difficulty.⁶

Such a diagnosis of the guitar's problems is reflective of the composer's parallel interest in medical matters and demonstrates a keen awareness of the needs of the performer in writing for the instrument. Generally speaking, ApIvor's inclination is to minimize technical problems for the guitarist in terms of their physical demand on the hands, allowing the performer to concentrate more on aspects of rhythm and color. ApIvor's writing for the guitar was already quite well developed in his three-movement *Concertino*, which has the distinction of being the first British guitar concerto of the postwar period.⁷ His next work for guitar, the *Variations*, Op. 29, was commissioned in 1958 by Bream, who premiered the *Concertino* earlier that year. For reasons that remain unclear, Bream never performed the *Variations*, and the work's premiere, by Isabel Smith at the Wigmore Hall, did not take place until a decade later, April 8, 1968. Schott in the meantime had published it in 1960, although this edition has long been out of print and is now very difficult to obtain.

Twelve-tone serialism formed the basis of ApIvor's musical style for the greater part of his career (between approximately 1948 and 1985). The row or series he used to construct the *Variations* is shown in **Figure 1**. Of the seven intervals present—major and minor second, perfect fourth, tritone, major and minor third, and minor sixth—the latter three are the most frequently employed during the course of the work.

Figure 1: *Variations for Guitar*, pre-compositional material.



This series is used as the basis for nine short pieces, each exhibiting contrasting rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and textural characteristics. Contrary to expectation, there is no statement of a "theme" at the outset of the work in the conventional manner, this role being fulfilled by the tone row itself. Hence the first piece constitutes the first variation. In each piece, the series is fully integrated into the composition so that its identity is largely imperceptible, and each variation is limited to one or two basic ideas, with the avoidance for the most part of exact repetition of material. In a 1982 interview with George Clinton, ApIvor gave a succinct account of the compositional approach he took in the *Variations*:

I came to a somewhat more advanced style with the *Variations* purely as a road along which I was travelling...If you look at the score you'll see that it still retains a number of quite well-marked classical landmarks, and some of the numbers have a well-marked sense of rhythmic impetus and very little signs of the Webern-like prosody, or amorphous pointillism. What probably disturbs about them is that they are for the first time athenatic...These variations are twelve-tone variations, in the same sense as many such contemporary works; they are a series of pieces which are built on a single twelve-tone row. In this sense the term "variations" is a swindle: it doesn't mean the same thing as the classical term.⁸

³ February 16, 1950, performed by Ivor Mairants. The reading also featured a part for ApIvor's friend, Dylan Thomas.

⁴ John Roberts (1919–98) was a pupil of Emilio Pujol (1886–1980) and an editor of the periodical *Guitar*.

⁵ George Clinton, "Serialism was raped: Denis ApIvor interviewed by George Clinton," *Guitar* 10, no. 9 (1982), 18.

⁶ Denis ApIvor, "Autobiography" (unpublished memoir, 1968), 199. The manuscript is in the ApIvor Collection, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, UK.

⁷ The work was premiered by Julian Bream in Glasgow, February 7, 1958. An unreleased BBC recording of this performance is available on my website at: markmarrington.com/denis-apivor/.

⁸ Clinton, 18.

APIVOR'S VARIATIONS, OP. 29: (cont.)

As in the *Concertino*, the composer makes extensive use of open strings, particularly bass strings E, A, and D, the weighty timbre of which causes these pitches to be emphasized as pedal notes. In the slower variations—Nos. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9—open strings are either sustained or repeated beneath the texture, while in the faster dancelike variations—Nos. 3 and 8 (Figures 2.1/2.2)—they are emphasized at the beginning of individual phrases to provide rhythmic impetus.

Figure 2.1: Var. 3, mm. 1-4.



Figure 2.2: Var. 8, mm. 1-6.



In their construction these particular variations are very much reflective of the “reiterative” approach to serialism that ApIvor was employing in his ballet works during this period, in which segments of the row are literally repeated in the manner of ostinati and hence become recognizable as themes. In his book, *An Introduction to Serial Composition for Guitarists*, the composer comments:

The very special capacity of the guitar for producing exciting reiterative dance rhythms is something which, at first sight, might seem to distance the instrument from music composed in serial technique which is by its nature opposed to this sort of engagement in repetitive rhythmic material. However... modifications of “strict serialism” in the direction of rotations of portions of the row in an ostinato-like fashion can yield rhythmic patterns which will be capable of providing the necessary impulse for dance movements either in ballet or in musical dance movements which have been traditionally associated with the guitar.⁹

The nature of the guitar fretboard also dictates the character of the vertical harmony employed in the *Variations* and

undoubtedly explains the prominence of the third (and its inversion the sixth) in the series. For example, chords based on sixths, which are playable in all positions of the guitar and between many combinations of strings, are an important feature of variations 1, 3, 4, 7, and 8.

Although *Variations* is essentially musically abstract, ApIvor's titles do evince the general character of each variation. While these indications do not specify an exact

style, they suggest that the composer wanted to provide a familiar perspective from which the performer could approach the music. To illustrate, Variation 2 is marked *Cantando; con placidezza, giustamente*, suggesting that the sustained tremolo part be treated as a lyrical melody. Variation 9 is marked *Andante molto moderato; inquieto, dolente*, equating the various changes of texture in the piece with mood shifts. Variation 3, which employs regularly alternating time signatures of 5/8 and 6/8 and ostinato figures, is preceded by the instruction *Allegretto, ritmico come una danza*.

The *Variations* also allude to traditional influences by their textures, which are suggestive of the stylistic characteristics of the classical guitar repertoire as it stood at the time of their composition.¹⁰ The aforementioned third and eighth variations, for instance, seem intended to evoke Spanish idioms, suggesting the dances for piano by Albéniz and Granados, which had been transcribed for the guitar by this time and were well established in the repertoire. The second variation is essentially a tremolo study, probably influenced by Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* (Figure 3, page 29).

⁹ Denis ApIvor, *An Introduction to Serial Composition for Guitarists* (Shaftesbury, Dorset, UK: Musical New Services, 1982), 23.

¹⁰ ApIvor likely became familiar with this repertoire through John Roberts as well as the recordings of Segovia.

Figure 3: Var. 2, mm. 1-4.

Figure 4: Var. 4, mm. 1-4.

The broken chord textures of the fourth and fifth variations appear modeled on the style of the studies and salon pieces of 19th-century guitar virtuosos like Sor, Aguado, and Giuliani. For example, the fourth variation (Figure 4) comprises mainly sixteenth-note arpeggio figures interspersed with occasional triplet and dotted eighth-based fragments.

The sixth and seventh variations, on the other hand, seem to reference Baroque style—the former, in its contrapuntal density, which is reminiscent of the guitar transcriptions of lute music by Weiss and Bach, and the latter in its dotted rhythms and fantasia-like character. The rather Bachian sixth variation (Figure 5, page 30) is based upon the interlocking of three and four sixteenth-note-based fragments to create a two-part contrapuntal texture, varied by timbral means through the use of a broad range of the fretboard.

Conclusion

ApIvor's approach in the *Variations* is best understood in terms of the narrative of “modernist” composition in the guitar repertoire, which took in a number of aesthetic positions during the course of the 20th century, including serialism. This, of course, had little in common with the Spanish identity that was simultaneously being promoted by Segovia, and which to a large extent involved the expunging of modernist ideas. Some important works for the guitar are serial in nature. Arnold Schoenberg's *Serenade*, Op. 24 (1923) contains a substantial guitar part, and the instrument was also used by Anton Webern in his Opp. 18 and 19 song cycles. As dodecaphonic music moved into “total serialism” during the 1950s, the guitar remained of interest to composers for its color palette, which appeared to be well-suited to the increasingly abstract textures generated by this compositional technique. The most notable example in this regard is Pierre Boulez's chamber work, *Le marteau*

APIVOR'S VARIATIONS, OP. 29: (cont.)

Figure 5: Var. 6, mm. 1-4.

sans maître (1952). British composers who dared to adopt serial techniques also looked to the guitar at about this time, including Reginald Smith Brindle, whose *El Polifemo de oro* (1956) is a key repertoire piece derived from the twelve-tone tradition (with strong Spanish hints). Other notable British serial composers who wrote highly regarded pieces for guitar include Humphrey Searle, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Richard Rodney Bennett. ApIvor's use of the guitar is thus part of a British thread of European modernism that provided a model from which to write for the instrument. *Variations*, as well as many of ApIvor's later serially conceived guitar works (see **List of Works** below), represents a largely unexplored facet of this repertoire for guitarists prepared to immerse themselves in the Anglo-modernist tradition.

Denis ApIvor List of Works: Guitar Compositions

Ensemble

Concertino for Guitar and Orchestra, Op. 26 (1954)
El Silencio Ondulado, guitar and chamber orchestra,
Op. 51 (1972)
Crystals, Op. 39, for six instruments (1965)

Duos and trios

Ten String Design, Op. 44 (violin and guitar, 1968)
Liaison, Op. 62 (guitar and keyboard instrument [ideally
Höhner pianet], 1976)
Cinquefoil, Op. 79 (flute, viola, guitar, 1984)

Guitar and voice

Seis Canciones de Federico García Lorca, Op. 8b (1946)
“Dammi oggi tuoi fior, primavera,” Op. 99 (voice and two
guitars, 1995)

Solo guitar

Variations, Op. 29 (1959)
Discanti, Op. 48 (1970)
Saeta, Op. 53 (1972)

Serenade, Op. 69 (1980)

Ten Pieces for Solo Guitar, Op. 72a/b (in *An Introduction to
Serial Composition for Guitarists*, 1982).

Sonatina, Op. 75 (1983)

Nocturne, Op. 78 (1985)

Orchestral use of the guitar

Overtones (Paul Klee Pieces), Op. 33 (1961)

Symphony No. 2, Op. 36 (1963)

Tarot, Op. 46 (1969)

Resonance of the Southern Flora (Paul Klee Pieces), Op. 54
(1972)

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61 (1975)

Symphony No.5, Op. 87 (1991)

Arrangements

Three French Lute Songs (Gabriel Bataille, 1608), voice and
guitar

“Prais me as ye think causs why” (Anon, Scottish, 1568),
voice, guitar, bass guitar

Gymnopodie No. 1 (Satie), solo guitar

“Deh Vieni” (Mozart, *Don Giovanni*), voice and guitar

Michaela's Love Song (Bizet, *Carmen*), solo guitar

All the above can be obtained from The Denis ApIvor Archive, Special
Collections, Brotherton Library, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, West
Yorkshire, LS2 9JT, England. The archive is searchable at: [library.leeds.
ac.uk/special-collections-explore/55922/denis_apivor_archive](http://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/55922/denis_apivor_archive). Email:
specialcollections@library.leeds.ac.uk. Many of ApIvor's scores are also
held by both the British Library and British Music Collection.

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of Denis ApIvor.

