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Several Chefs Cooking a Latin Recipe, Blending Melodies and Genres

By Jon Pareles
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Folk, pop and classical music meet in unlikely places in South America. That was one recurring motif, along with nimble fingers, attention to detail and a sense of humor, in Monday night's concert at Merkin Concert Hall. It was the evening half of the New York Guitar Festival's free pair of concerts, "Guitar Marathon: Las Americas," which was recorded for WNYC's Soundcheck. The afternoon show had featured North American music, down through Mexico. The evening concert was a quintuple bill largely chosen by its headliner, the Brazilian guitarist Badi Assad, with musicians from Brazil, Uruguay and Peru and a repertoire that also embraced Argentina and Venezuela.

Ms. Assad was the least classifiable musician in the lineup. Years ago, she started making albums as a classical guitarist like her brothers, the duo Sérgio and Odair Assad, but recently she has featured her singing. On Monday, she arrived with a headset microphone and an electric guitar (which could simulate acoustic-guitar tones) that had a drumstick under the strings, lifting them away from the frets. The first sounds she played, in "The Being Between," were sliding pitches suggesting a koto; soon she was plucking and tapping ethereal chords on both sides of the drumstick and then cooing, in a voice like affectionate baby talk, about innocence and mysticism: "The human's journey/A cactus flower in a father's hand."

She continued with Brazilian pop songs transformed by her imaginative virtuosity, moving from gauzy delicacy to vigorous propulsion, from dreaming to dancing and back. One song summed up the concert. Ms. Assad had discovered that the chords of a Brazilian standard about a caged songbird, Luiz Gonzaga's "Assum Preto," matched the harmonies of "Estudio No. 1," by Heitor Villa-Lobos, with its cascading arpeggios. So she merged them, singing mournfully and then mimicking birdcalls.

Romero Lubambo, a Brazilian guitarist based in the United States, brought classical-guitar meticulousness to his jazzy solo improvisations; he was also the concert's most puckish presence. He made tunes materialize out of

quick-changing chords, and his samba and bossa nova rhythms could ease their way from subliminal pulse to the center of attention. He toyed with buzzing textures and insistent dissonances in a brisk version of "Aquarela do Brasil," and in his "P'ro Flavio," a whirlwind of dissonance and pointillistic picking coalesced into yet another upbeat melody.

Jorge Caballero, a masterly classical guitarist born in Peru, chose the concert's prickliest piece: the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera's Sonata (Op. 47), which splinters Argentine folk elements into stark modernist declamations on the way to a final movement that picks up the momentum of a folk dance. With his meticulous balance and chameleonic timbres, he also played more ingratiating reflections on local heritage: the Venezuelan composer Antonio Lauro's "Suite Venezolano" and two Chopinesque waltzes by the Paraguayan composer Agustin Barrios.

The concert also included two guitar duos. The Brasil Guitar Duo — João Luiz Rezende Lopes and Douglas Lora — concentrated, naturally, on Brazil. Their intricately shared arrangements sooner or later found their way toward warm melodies and pinpoint dance rhythms, particularly in a medley of Egberto Gismonti pieces. Duo Siquiera Lima — Cecilia Siquiera, from Uruguay, and Fernando de Lima, from Brazil — were more geographically diverse in pieces as finely detailed as a Fabergé egg. Hugo Fattoruso's "Candombé," drawing on Afro-Uruguayan rhythms, gathered as much percussive momentum from their plucked chords as from their tapping on their guitars.

As their set ended, Mr. Lubambo — claiming they were too much competition — confiscated Mr. de Lima's guitar, and they finished the set playing the speedy "Tico Tico" on one guitar, four hands.