

From Topic to Prime Sonority:

The Structural Evolution of the ‘Guitar Chord’ in Alberto Ginastera’s Oeuvre

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Abstract

The “guitar chord” is a characteristic device of Alberto Ginastera’s musical idiolect. In its purest form, the chord consists of the arpeggiation of the six pitches of the guitar’s open strings in standard tuning. Despite its name, it is often performed by instruments and combinations of instruments (e.g., piano, harp, strings, etc.) in works that don’t actually have a guitar, thus functioning as a virtual representation of the instrument and an idiosyncratic manifestation of the broader concept of the “guitar topic” (Plesch 2009). Within the context of Argentine music, this particular topic bears strong connections with the stoic folk symbol of the gaucho (a landless horseman of the Pampas) and its associated iconography and poetic imagery, where the guitar boasts a central role (Schwartz-Kates 2002).

While the chord has been traditionally described as a symbolic compositional fingerprint present across Ginastera’s different stylistic eras (Chase 1957; Gaviria 2010), no studies have shown how its implementation was affected by the drastic changes in style that took place between his self-defined “objective” (1934-1948) and “subjective” (1948-1958) nationalist periods (Suárez Urtubey 1967). While folkloristic character pieces, songs, and stage works abounded in the former, the latter favored instrumental works in abstract classical forms where the folk references were largely subsumed into a complex post-tonal fabric.

My paper presents an account of this development, analyzing different instances of the “guitar chord” drawn from all of Ginastera’s stylistic periods. Additionally, I introduce a classification system, evaluating these chords in terms of their structural role, ranging from surface-level picturesque topoi reminiscent of Argentine cultural symbology to “prime sonorities” responsible for the generation of the pitch content of entire movements (Laufer 2003). Finally, I contextualize Ginastera’s compositional evolution within the milieu of twentieth-century Argentine intellectuals and their troubled sense of national identity as a consequence of the dialectical oppositions (e.g., urban vs. rural; unitary state vs. federalism) that lie at the heart of the nation’s cultural heritage.

Figure 4: Partial list of guitar chords in Alberto Ginastera's works.

Opus	Work	Movement	Year	Stylistic period	M. num	Type
2	3 Danzas Argentinas	1	1937	Objective	77-78	1
7	Malambo	-	1940	Objective	1	2
8	Estancia	Cuadro 1	1941	Objective	10-11; 12-13	2
9	Obertura Fausto Criollo	-	1943	Objective	3-5	2
10	Cinco canciones populares Argentinas	No.2: Triste	1943	Objective	18-20	2
11	Las horas de una estancia	No.5: El Mediodia	1943	Objective	1	1
15	Suite de danzas criollas	4	1946	Objective	4; 8; 16	1
16	Pampeana No.1	-	1947	Transition	1	1
20	String Quartet No.1	3	1948	Subjective	1-11	3
21	Pampeana No.2	-	1950	Subjective	5mm. before 26	3
22	Piano Sonata No.1	2	1952	Subjective	109-114; 185-186	1
		3		Subjective	32	2
23	Variaciones Concertantes	Theme and finale	1953	Subjective	1-5	3
24	Pampeana No.3	3	1954	Subjective	13-14	3
25	Harp Concerto	3	1956/65	Subjective	1	3
47	Guitar Sonata	1-4	1976	Neo-expressionist	1	3

Figure 5: Type 1 guitar chord from *Suite de danzas criollas*, op.15 No.4, mm.1-5.

Figure 6: Type 2 guitar chord from *3 danzas argentinas*, op.2 No.1 “Danza del viejo boyero”, mm.62-81

62 "White keys" C major

"Black keys" Db pentatonic

69

77 Poco rit. a Tempo

"Em": Guitar chord

Figure 7: Type 2 guitar chord from *Cinco canciones populares argentinas*, op.10 No.2 “Triste”, mm.18-20.

18

Voice

ba - jo de un li-món ver - de donde el a-gua no co - rri - a

Piano

Gm: i v Guitar chord

Figure 8: Formal structure of String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3,

Measure	Section	Micro	Material
0-11	A	Introduction	<GC> + <M>
12-19			<GC> + <M>
20-28			T<GC> + <M>
29-34	Transition	IC 4 emancipation	IC4 T3 -> (OCT _{0,1})
35-36		IC 4 and 5 emancipation	<GC2>
37-46	B	Rhapsodic superposition based on 0-11	<GC2> + <M>
47-51		Contrapuntal elaboration	<M>
52-58			<M>
59-69			<M> + <IC5>
70-75		Climax	<GC2> + IC4 saturation
76-87	Retransition	Anticlimax	<IC5> + <M>
88-97		Synthesis	<IC4> + <M>
98-113	A''	Coda	<GC>

Figure 9: Type 3 guitar chord from String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.1-11.

1 Calmo e poetico ♩ = 56

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

<M>
5

mf

pp

pp

pp

<GC>
5-35 (02479)

Figure 10: Analysis of String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.1-11.

Figure 10 shows a musical score for String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.1-11. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, and Cello/Double Bass (labeled GC). The analysis includes interval labels: T-2 (two instances), T-4 (two instances), and dyad labels (014), (016), (0257), and (016). Red dashed boxes highlight specific intervals and dyads. Orange arcs connect notes across staves to indicate intervals.

Figure 11: String Quartet No.1 Op.20, mvt. 3, mm.29-34.

Octatonic space: Projection of ic4 dyads at T(3)

Figure 11 shows a musical score for String Quartet No.1 Op.20, mvt. 3, mm.29-34. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The score is marked with a box containing '3' and a circled '3'. The analysis includes the label 'Oct (0,1)'. Red dashed boxes highlight specific intervals and dyads. The Cello/Double Bass staff is labeled 'pizz.' and 'arco'.

Figure 12: String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.35-36.

Figure 13: Reduction of String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.35-37.

Figure 14: Reduction and analysis of String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.70-75.

ic 4
ic 4
ic 5
T+ic4
ic4 and 5

Figure 15: String Quartet No.1, op. 20, mvt. 3, mm.98-113.

14
98 Adagio $\text{♩} = 46$
15
16
ppp
ppp
ppp
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
arco
ppp
ppp
ppp

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