

GLENN BRANCA

The Devil's Choirmaster

BY HP NEWQUIST

Glenn Branca is the most important composer for rock guitar that you've never heard of. His lack of name recognition in popular guitar circles stems from the fact that he is a product of the New York avant-garde musical community, which receives little notice outside the city's limits. Yet Branca has been awarded commissions to write his brand of guitar music for events all over the world, and graduates of his guitar ensembles include the leaders of Sonic Youth and Helmet. For nearly 20 years, Branca has remained the invisible man of aggressive and experimental "noise" guitar, all the while composing and orchestrating pieces that are heavier, more disturbing, and more bombastic than anything you'll ever hear on the radio. His music has been described as frightening and even fascist—the kinds of things you'd expect to hear about Black Sabbath or Metallica, but not about a lone composer residing in Manhattan.

Using oddly tuned and custom-designed guitars, Branca has composed a number of symphonies for guitar that call for as many as 13 different guitarists, the most recent piece having been released last year. His early ideas in the 1980s about tonality, drones, harmonic tunings, and repeated passages had an impact on the development of today's avant-garde and industrial music. In the January 1996 issue of *Guitar*, David Bowie even admitted that Branca was one of the only guitarists around that he had any interest in working with.

For an unknown, at least in rock circles, Branca has a lot of fans, and a lot of influence. He is also surprisingly accessible and forthright, which is in marked contrast to other outsiders.

What gave you the initial idea to start writing experimental music for guitars instead of more traditional symphonic instruments?

Well, there was no way I was going to be able to work with traditional instruments, because I had no formal training. At first I used things that I found on the street, like piano sounding boards, or instruments from pawnshops, like old trombones. Most of the people I met in New York were rock musicians and a lot of them played guitar, so that was a natural path to follow.

You see, at first I was trying to form rock bands, plus I had an idea of doing acoustic music in theater. I was at school at Emerson College in Boston, and I wanted to start this

performance-art/rock band, but it was nothing I could imagine happening at any of the clubs in Boston. So I moved to New York, to see if it would work here. Plus, I wanted to be part of the punk scene here. I was impressed by Patty Smith, Richard Hell, Television, The Ramones, all those people. I put together this sort of performance-art/rock band called Theoretical Girl. To be honest, I wasn't taking it seriously, I just wanted to do it. We started out as pretty much a straight punk band with noise breaks in the middle, but it sounded good. And in New York, it got people's interest, which might not have happened anywhere else. There was just this tremendous audience interest. I decided I wanted to make

it bigger than just a rock band, so we decided to push the music towards composers we liked, like Stockhausen. They were all writing music that was as extreme as heavy metal, except they weren't using guitars. As we went off in that direction, the further we got from the center, the more successful the band became. In 1979, I took it outside the band and wrote an instrumental piece for six guitars, and that was really the beginning of all this.

What prompted you to use strange tunings?

Initially, my tunings were just ideas about tuning a guitar differently. There was no particular formula at first. I liked the sounds of open strings and unison strings, so I came up with tunings that sounded nice to me. For instance, I would tune the bottom two strings to E, then the middle two strings to the E an octave higher, and then the top two strings to E an octave higher than that. I would also mix up string gauges on the guitar, which was considered sacrilege. It sounded beautiful, though. I remember going to lots of different places, and while we were playing during soundchecks the sound guys would ask, "What is that?" It sounded so different from traditional guitars.

I also liked musical clusters, like half-step harmonies. I'd put a half step on top of a half step on top of a half on top of another half step in what we called staircase fingering. We were creating chords that never existed in rock before. Because of the way we used different tunings and string gauges, there was no way that they could have been heard in rock before. Then I started encountering acoustic phenomena, where you'd hear stuff I hadn't written. You hear these close harmonies all together and they begin to sound like kazoo's, or strings, and a lot of other instruments that weren't there. [Editor's note: *this is no exaggeration. The Fifth Movement of Branca's Symphony No. 6 "Devil Choirs At The Gates Of Heaven" sounds like it contains medieval choruses, a string section, and woodwinds. In reality it is 10 guitars, a bass, and a drum set. No synths.*]

When I heard these unwritten sounds, I wondered how I could hear more of them. Then I had to go microtonal—quarter steps and eighth steps that made the harmonies even more interesting. From there it was evolutionary. Not only did I change the tunings and the gauges, but I actually changed the fret dimensions. I had some guitars made that were more like hammer dulcimers and harps than actual guitars. That became something of an albatross, because I was getting involved in math, geometry, and things that had nothing to do with music. Fractals and chaos theory had come along as well, which were interesting computer

Ebel Roberts

mathematics. But the problem arose that I was becoming a mathematician and not being a musician; it was too theoretical. Plus, the conventional orchestra is not set up to play along those lines. For instance, when you look at the fretboard, you really have just a bunch of numbers on a plane. When you change the frets, you have to relearn the numbering system, which was difficult for everybody and limited me in composition. So I went back to the equal temperament system, and now I'm working with the harmonic series, which is exactly even in nature. Trees and plants grow in relation to the harmonic series, so I thought, "Let's tune instruments to this system." The harmonic series is what we hear when we hear a tone played—what we're really hearing is a whole cluster of sounds together. We're hearing many separate tones happening so quickly that, like film, it appears to be one composite whole.

In the end, though, music is an expressionist form, not math. You can't systematically create good music. It has to come from the heart and from what you feel.

How did you find guitarists for your ensembles?

Most of them were just the people that happened to be hanging around the same places I was in New York. [Sonic Youth's] Lee Ranaldo, for instance, came from the band Flux when one of his friends left my band. I didn't even audition him. After a while, as I started writing stuff that was more complex, I realized it was getting inbred: too many friends of friends of friends were playing with me. Finally, I took an ad out in the paper looking for more professionally trained musicians. One of the people who answered the ad eventually introduced [Helmet's] Page Hamilton to the band, even though Page didn't answer the ad himself. This was the beginning of the time when I first started writing music in staff notation, and I found out that a lot of the people that I had added around the time Page came in could read music. They weren't just rock musicians, they had a variety of interests.

Where do you think the future of rock guitar lies?

This may sound inconceivable, but I think the potential of the guitar is almost untouched. Sonic Youth has been revolutionary in terms of what it does in rock with guitar tunings, but they still haven't touched on microtonality, really writing carefully worked-out pieces based on microtonality. And I think that's too bad, because rock guitar seems to have stopped completely with Nirvana; no one wants to do anything different than what they did five years ago. And most people want to hear—and play—what



Note the staggered frets on Branca's guitar neck

sounded like a hit yesterday. You tend to forget that when people like Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart slip into the commercial music business, it's not a normal occurrence. They're the exceptions. Somebody must have let their guard down to allow Zappa to make music for a major record company, because the record companies try to prevent people like that from making music. Thus, it's conceivable that rock could go away or become some marginal art form like jazz. Remember, swing was jazz, and it was popu-

lar music for a long time. But now no one cares about it as pop music. Rock may end up the same way.

There's a lot that can be done in both standard tunings and in microtonality. Microtonality on the guitar has always been a part of the blues, in bent notes. But instead of just stretching notes, I think you can actually compose for the blue note. Still, it shocks me how uninterested most rock bands are in stretching the form of the guitar even a little bit. ☒