

**Deal** (1995), improvising electric guitar soloist, optional drummer and large chamber ensemble (16 players), commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic for guitarist Bill Frisell. Boosey & Hawkes 1995. (28')

#### Program Note on Deal

I started in music as an electric guitar player. For fifteen years, beginning in my early twenties, I composed chamber and orchestra music, including two cello concertos. In the last five years of that time I have been including electric guitar in these otherwise "classical" ensembles and performing them myself. In short, I am particularly qualified to compose the work you are about to hear. Lest you think me arrogant in making this pronouncement I should hurry to the point; it is ironic that, in spite of my familiarity with the world of the guitar, I did not end up *writing* for it -- go figure!

It occurred to me that the electric guitar has evolved primarily through aurally transmitted, improvised, non-notated music. It is quite different from the interpretive tradition of the classical cello, for example. The distinctions between composer and performer that are vivid in western classical music are blurred in music indigenous to the guitar. Personal style, for a guitarist, is expressed as much by what he/she plays as how. For this reason the guitar part in *Deal* is, for the most part, improvised. The soloist is provided with a "part" of sorts and an electronic (MIDI) mock-up tape of the entire orchestra score. The part contains a reduction of the orchestra part (playable on two guitars), and an almost traditionally notated guitar part that conveys a sense of tonality in the proudest sense of the word. That is, tonality as tone of voice and attitude as well as harmonic orientation.

*Deal* has a serious but changeable tone -- as serious and changeable as the world seems to me. My first thoughts on the piece were appropriately shaped by my to hear an L.A. Philharmonic New Music Group concert (the commissioners of **Deal**). The feel of the hall and the vibe of the players made me think of Mahler -- who knows why, it was not being performed. I think the combined clarity and expressivity of their playing made me think of some of the remarkable passages like the opening of *Kindertotenlieder* for oboe, bassoon, French horn and voice. You know, I really like that every big Mahler piece contains the whole world. No wonder people say that Mahler's musical sounds alike: if every piece contains the whole world there is bound to be a significant intersection.

All of the above inspired the orchestra part for *Deal* as follows: From a practical point of view, just as I wanted the guitarists to do what they do best (play what they hear and feel), I wanted the same for the orchestra. They are asked to interpret a complex score, composed and notated with great attention to detail and nuance. Spiritually, the piece began to take shape as the soloist dealing with a whole world that he/she was, paradoxically, prepared for *and* surprised by. On my last visit to California I took a long drive up the coast. This trip provided a useful metaphor for my world/our world, this piece etc.: There I was, not quite sure why I was

there (in California or on the planet), at one moment a breathtakingly gorgeous expanse of ocean, at another moment an auto wrecking yard with heaps of burning tires, then a tacky, run-down, tourist-trap gift shop which actually contained some very beautiful and expressive wood carvings, then the radio announcement of more killing in Rwanda and Bosnia, and then Mahler's delightful Fourth Symphony . . . and then . . . The world doesn't make really make sense to me; I/we actively make sense of the world (if we're lucky).

The final layer in this peculiar topography is a tape part made up of sounds from the "real" world. It was my idea that these sounds would draw an inclusive perimeter around the electric guitar and orchestra: compared to a barking dog and a ringing phone the electric guitar and chamber ensemble have more in common than the labels "classical music" "jazz," "rock," and "world music," ordinarily allow. In the end the effect of the tape part for me is to highlight the hallucinatory, dreamlike quality of the score. It is as if the "real" world impinges on our reverie from time to time and thereby make us conscious of it.

-- Steven Mackey