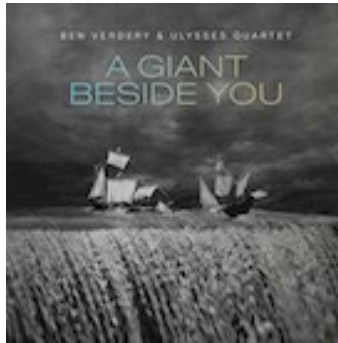


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Ben Verdery & Ulysses Quartet: *A Giant Beside You* ReEntrant/New Focus Recordings

Many years have passed since guitarist Ben Verdery's (b. 1955) first experience playing with a string quartet—Vivaldi's *Concerto for lute in D major* as a student—which makes his collaborative release with Ulysses Quartet (Christina Bouey and Rhiannon Banerdt, violins; Colin Brookes, viola; Grace Ho, cello) all the more special, for Verdery and listener alike. Rare are recordings coupling guitar and strings; rarer still are ones featuring world premieres of recently composed material, in this case pieces by Bryce Dessner (b. 1976) and Verdery. Adding to the release's appeal, the guitarist has included his own arrangement of Leonard Bernstein's *Clarinet Sonata* and a rendition of the South American-flavoured *Andean Suite* by Chilean composer Javier Farias (b. 1973), his the only non-world premiere recording on the disc. *A Giant Beside You* also stands out for featuring Verdery on classical guitar and, on his own *About To Fall* and *A Giant Beside You*, electric. While some listeners might find the latter a less soothing sound (in the titular work, specifically), its presence broadens the album's scope plus brings a different dimension to this eclectic project.

For 2018's *Quintet for High Strings*, Dessner uses a scordatura that involves tuning four guitar strings an octave higher than normal. That move dramatically reconfigures the sonic character of the performance when arpeggio patterns and bass notes intone at a higher pitch; it also amplifies the ornamental quality of the guitar (in its repetitive strums it even sometimes resembles a dulcimer). Eighteen minutes in total, the work progresses without pause through three movements, the animated first setting the scene with intricate embroidery and insistent guitar work, the second mysterious, slow, and ponderous, and the rousing third a sparkling, picking-enhanced plunge into folk song territory.

For his 2017 transcription of Bernstein's *Clarinet Sonata*, Verdery smartly redistributed the original's woodwind and piano parts amongst the quintet so that it plays to the different instruments' strengths. As the guitar wends an unpredictable path through the lyrical "Grazioso," the strings alternate between supporting the guitar harmonically and authoritatively taking the lead. The second movement, marked "Andantino-Vivace Leggiero," begins serenely, the writing emblematic of Bernstein's tender side, before the pace accelerates and grows more dance-like, again the rhythms characteristic of the composer responsible for *West Side Story*. In both movements, the transitions between the instruments as they exchange background and foreground roles are deftly handled. In fact, Verdery's transcription is so convincingly realized, one would never know it came into the world as anything but a work written for guitar and strings.

Verdery's *About To Fall* (2022), which pays homage to his recently passed friend and long-time Yale colleague Ingram Marshall, builds on an initial swelling of chords and in its measured unfolding assumes the character of a stately and heartfelt lament. For *A Giant Beside You* (2021-22), Verdery reworked an earlier piece he wrote for the Australian quartet Guitar Trek that came with the directive that it reference a popular song. Attracted by its funky riff, harmonic progression, and other details, the guitarist selected Sly and the Family Stone's "Stand" and works all manner of rock gestures into the performance, from distortion, wah-wah, and slide to dive-bombing theatrics. At first, it's as if the guitarist's strafing the quartet with spiky interjections but eventually the parts cohere and the five march side-by-side through the piece's raw landscape.

Worlds removed from it is Farias's three-part *Andean Suite*, which sees Verdery re-arming himself with classical guitar and exploring guitar techniques from different countries in South America. Titled after a Peruvian celebration that includes a blood fight between a bull and an Andean condor, "Yawar Fiesta" is naturally fiery. Verdery's strums and picking vividly evoke South America during the unaccompanied intro before things turn passionate with the quartet's entrance. After the strings introduce "Huayno" with an expressive outpouring, the music, now buoyed by an enticing Altiplano rhythm, takes on a supplicating quality that's almost Piazzolla-esque. Executed at a breathless pace and grounded in a traditional Bolivian dance, "Diablada" takes the recording out on a celebratory note and features dazzling Chilean folk guitar playing.

Verdery and Ulysses Quartet benefit equally from this collaboration. *A Giant Beside You* casts him as an intrepid and imaginative explorer and the quartet as equally adventurous and up to the many challenges posed by such a wide-ranging project. In slightly less than an hour, the five travel confidently from American classical to South American folk and make room for arresting detours along the way—a scenic and intriguing journey, to say the least.

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