



Bio information: **GILLES LAVAL**

Title: **100 GUITARES SUR UN BATEAU IVRE [100 GUITARS ON A DRUNKEN BOAT]** (Cuneiform Rune 535)

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FILE UNDER: **ROCK / ART ROCK / LIVE SPECTACLE**

Guitarist and spectacle organizer Gilles Laval puts on large-scale musical events in cities all over Europe. Each event is worked on over a six month period and ultimately presented with the public seated in the middle of four stages, as Gilles and co-conductors direct 100 guitarists of varying ages and skills through music written to work in such events!

When Arthur Rimbaud wrote his 1871 poem *Le Bateau ivre*, it's likely that he'd never boarded any vessel larger than a ferry across the river Meuse. At 17, his voyages to Java, Yemen, and Ethiopia were still far in the future, but the young writer was no stranger to the tempestuous seas of sex, love, and the subconscious. Plunging through vertiginous waves and "milk-white spume", his "drunken boat" finds an ecstatic death in fire and breakers. The metaphorical implications are many, and it's easy to see why guitarist, educator, and **composer Gilles Laval** took it as inspiration for his return to the Cuneiform label, following his 2022 contributions to the brilliant Franco-Japanese band **Balungan's Kudu Bisa Kudu**.

"I wanted to find an unconventional form of writing that was accessible to as many people as possible," Laval explains, noting that he's an avid snorkeler and scuba diver, with a life-long passion for the sea. "In this poem by Rimbaud, which I read regularly, the sea symbolizes freedom, adventure, escape, and rebellion.

"*Le Bateau ivre* guided me throughout the composition as a common thread," he continues, "and the title itself opens up an immediate and limitless imagination."

Laval's *100 guitares sur un bateau ivre* is much more than a cruise through Rimbaud's poetic waters, however. In its seven sections, Laval unfurls a narrative that has only a tangential connection to the poet's imaginary voyage, while incorporating atmospherics drawn from his own aquatic adventures. There is great beauty here, as the music often embraces the otherworldly and immersive aspects of the marine environment, but also quietly subversive commentary. "I wanted to denounce the madness of overfishing, and new forms of fishing such as bottom trawling that massacre the seabed without respecting anything," Laval says. And if his music embraces darkness as well as adventure, that's only natural. *100 guitares sur un bateau ivre's* final movement, "Unsaved", is a wordless eulogy for all of the nameless migrants who've died in desperate voyages to find safety and peace.

What has been a place of wonder and joy for the composer has also been a "horrible cemetery" for others, he notes. Still, the strongest currents here have to do with surprise, transformation, and empowerment. On the surface, Laval has embraced Rimbaud's aesthetic of "the systematic derangement of the senses", using the abstract sonic possibilities of the electric guitar to produce a shifting, restless soundscape that asks for the listener's active engagement.

"Yes, I like this idea of disturbing the senses, shaking up sounds, melodies, harmonies, and ways of doing things," Laval says, adding that his tools include prepared guitars and multiple eBows, handheld electronic devices that allow guitarists access to violin-like sustain and various timbral effects. "There is no organized narrative to the poem," he continues. "I drew inspiration from the sensations I experienced each time I read it, with these explosions of colors, scents, sounds, rhythms, images, and a sense of the revolt brewing within."

For many, the idea of an orchestra made up of 100 electric guitars will be revolutionary enough, but there are precedents for some of Laval's innovations—and he was in on some of them. For instance, he was the motivating factor behind Fred Frith's *Impur*, which called for an ensemble of 100 and emerged from the avant-rock mastermind's extended residency at the National Music School in Villeurbanne, where Laval teaches. The French musician has also performed with Rhys Chatham, whose early multi-guitar pieces prefigured the work of everyone from American rock band Sonic Youth to Canadian composer and guitarist Tim Brady.

For Laval, working with up to 100 other plectrists is a way of expressing his love of his chosen instrument. “I can't get enough of it!” he enthuses. “I also feel most at home working with musicians who share my musical worlds or musical practices. I already have other ideas for compositions, perhaps adding other instruments, but almost anything is possible with guitars.”

There's also a democratic impulse at play here: although all too often shunned in symphonic circles, the electric guitar is the instrument of choice in many cultures worldwide and is accessible to all, from amateurs to virtuosi. Built into *100 guitares sur un bateau ivre*, Laval explains, are multiple levels of complexity; relative novices can comfortably take part (with some preparation), while experienced professionals will have their skills as well as their preconceptions challenged.

“Bringing together 100 people in a common project is no small feat,” the composer explains. “I've chosen to offer a ‘long-term’ approach: one to two months of preparatory work with a core group of 20 guitarists who will then be distributed among four groups of 25. I also need to train four captains or ‘skippers’ who will lead the four groups, with the help of the guitarists in the core group. Mutual support is essential so that everyone can find their way, regardless of their background or guitar level.

“Once the 100 guitarists are assembled,” he continues, “I propose a work period of approximately six months, with six to eight rehearsals during this time. Things take time to settle in, and the process is complicated, but it works!”

Part of Laval's pedagogical intent is that his hundred musicians will learn more than just his score. Along the way, he hopes, they'll pick up the skills necessary to navigate this world's increasingly troubled waters, using the solidarity they've developed on-stage and in the rehearsal process to combat racism, sexism, disinformation, and the other plagues of our time.

“The future doesn't seem to me to be the brightest one could wish for: wars, famines, the climate, politics, leaders, nationalist and populist movements, et cetera,” Laval allows. “The list is far too long. We currently know less about the ocean floor and its ecosystem than the surface of the moon, and already some new colonizing autocrats want to go to Mars. Yet we must continue to navigate, to rebel, to remain hopeful.

“The battle is tough,” he adds. “But in the end the most important thing is to see the smiles and enthusiasm of the participants, and the pleasure they have in sharing this extraordinary musical moment with the audience.”

We'll have to extrapolate those smiles from this recorded version, but in *100 guitares sur un bateau ivre* Laval and his musicians have courage, hope, and adventure to spare—and to share.