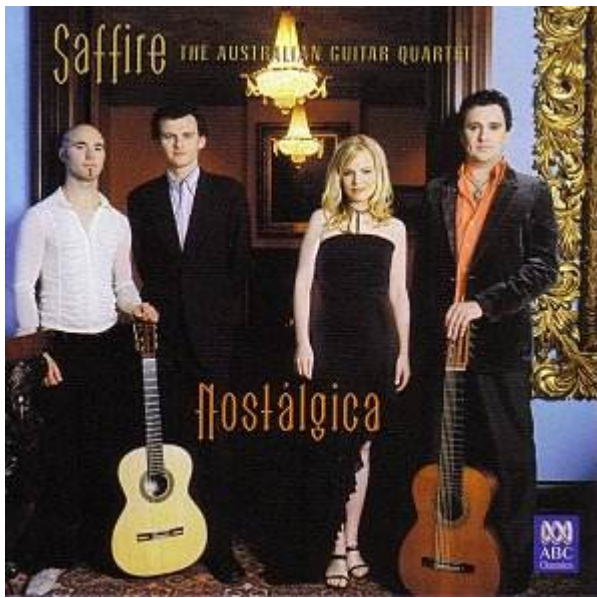


## The 'Borderless' RECORDING OF THE MONTH



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### **Nostalgica**

**Juan MARTÍN (b. 1943)**: Rumba Nostálgica; **Astor PIAZZOLLA (1921 – 1992)**: Romance del Diablo; **Roland DYENS (b. 1955)**: Tango en Skai; **Béla BARTÓK (1881 – 1945)**: Romanian Folk Dances; **Bill WHELAN (b. 1950)**: Riverdance (from *Riverdance The Show*); **CELTIC TRADITIONAL**: She Moved Through the Fair; **Bill WHELAN**: American Wake (from *Riverdance The Show*); **CELTIC TRADITIONAL**: The Salley Gardens; **Nigel WESTLAKE (b. 1958)**: Six Fish; **DEEP PURPLE**: Highway Star.

● Saffire – The Australian Guitar Quartet (Antony Field, Slava Grigoryan, Karin Schaupp, Gareth Koch).

Recorded 4–16 June 2004,  
Jumpstart Studios, Brisbane,  
Australia.

● **ABC CLASSICS 476 261-1**  
[54:39]

Let me say from the outset that this is a fantastic disc! It should be heard by anyone who isn't prejudiced against mixing genres, playing "arrangements", having fun. So what is this? Cross-over? Any record covering both Bartók and Deep Purple could with some justification be labelled "cross-over", but to me it is something else. 'Cross-over' implies that there are borders to cross, and these four eminent musicians see no borders; this is border-less music. Maybe the guitar is the instrument that lends itself most easily to building bridges between genres, styles and times, especially when played as on this disc. Here are four of Australia's best classical guitarists, all of them with important solo careers, but the first thing to notice, in the very first track, is that we don't hear four individuals playing as it were together; we hear a guitar quartet, we hear unanimity in rhythmic feeling, in the approach to the music, we hear musicians listening to each other.

The sound is great, the placing of the instruments in the stereo image is exact and they blend marvellously. Of course you hear that the unseen artists behind and between your speakers are classically trained but the effect is of a highly professional popgroup playing acoustically for once – and enjoying it.

Very important, and very imaginative, is the use of a whole array of different guitars, thus finding new and unique colours for each piece of music. Besides the "normal" classical guitar, we hear flamenco guitar, baritone guitar, eight-string guitar, octave guitar and steel-string guitar. We even hear a resonator guitar, used mainly in blues music, once even played

with so called 'bottleneck' technique which gives an uncanny likeness to the Hawaii guitar.

There is tremendous rhythmic zest in **Juan Martín's** *Rumba Nostálgica*, which also lends its name to the whole collection. I haven't been so captivated, so spellbound by a piece of "light music" for many a good day. And make no mistake: I don't take "light music" lightly. This is playing on the same level as the world's finest string quartets, the same flexible interplay, the same "eye-contact". Must play it again, Sam!

Then **Piazzolla's** *Romance del Diablo*, which is not really as devilish as the title makes us believe, rather impressionistically colourful with a surprisingly modern-sounding ballad-tune. The tango rhythm is there, as in all his music, but not for dancing, which it is in **Roland Dyens' Tango en Skai**, an attractively laid-back piece with a catchy tune and sudden rhythmic accents.

When they continue with **Bartók's** well-known *Romanian Folk Dances*, originally set for the piano and later orchestrated by the composer, it strikes me that guitars sound much more genuine in this music, are closer to the idiom. The arrangements here – all the arrangements are by the members of the quartet – as in the rest of the programme, are colourful and observant to the character of each piece. You even imagine there is a cimbalom present, and the sixth and final dance ends ecstatically.

The Celtic music tradition is also highlighted, both in a couple of standard traditional songs, rubbing shoulders with **Bill Whelan's** latter-day *Riverdance*-compositions. Especially the first of them holds on to the ecstasy created in Bartók, becoming even more physical with steel-stringed guitar, heaps of percussive effects and stomping feet. My whole listening room was rocking afterwards.

There is also a World Premiere Recording on the disc, a suite by **Nigel Westlake** entitled *Six Fish*, and there is a suitable amount of splashes and other fishy sounds in these colourful waters, housing such rare specimens as Guitarfish, Sunfish and Sling-Jaw Wrasse.

Finally rock fans will receive their share in **Deep Purple's Highway Star**. And why just rock fans? In spite of a very modest interest in rock music I enjoyed this track enormously as one more example of border-less contemporary music.

The booklet text – as always with ABC filled with interesting information – tells me that SAFFIRE – The Australian Guitar Quartet, got together more or less as an *ad hoc* group in 2002 for an outdoor concert and after that decided to become a permanent ensemble. They released their first CD in June 2003 and it went straight to the top of the Australian Classical Music Charts. I see no reason why the new disc shouldn't go the same way. I have no hesitation in recommending it to all, except perhaps the most narrow-minded, and even you should give it a try. If there were something like "The Border-less Recording of the Month" I would appoint this disc to that title.

**Göran Forsling**