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Classical Music, Plugging In

By STEVE SMITH

THOUGH the electric guitar was introduced in the early 1930s, its adoption into classical music came decades later. Composers like Leonard Bernstein and Michael Tippett used the instrument chiefly for its vernacular allusions. Later Rhys Chatham, Glenn Branca and Lois V. Vierk tapped into its capacity for producing complex overtones and, yes, punishing volume.

Nowadays the electric guitar has become ubiquitous, deployed to vastly different ends in a wide variety of formats. Among its foremost innovators is Scott Johnson, a New York composer and guitarist whose renown falls well short of his achievement, at least partly, no doubt, because of the snail's pace at which his work has been documented. "Americans," recently released by the Tzadik label (TZA 8074; CD), is the first newly recorded disc to be issued under Mr. Johnson's name since 1996.

"Bowery Haunt," a rock-inflected electric-guitar duet, and "Anthem Hunt," a pensive quartet with a prominent cello part, establish Mr. Johnson's flair as a performer. "The Illusion of



Julien Jourdes for The New York Times

Scott Johnson's recently released album, "Americans," is the first newly recorded disc of his work to be issued under his name since 1996.

Guidance," written for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, shows that he also writes idiomatically for other players; Derek Johnson, no relation to the composer, handles the perky, bristling guitar part.

"Americans," a three-part suite, is a striking example of the way Mr. Johnson derives music from the contours and inflections of speech, a method he devised for "John Somebody," a widely influential 1982 work for guitar and tape. "Americans all look the same to me," a recorded female voice says at the start of the piece. As an isolated clip —

"same to me" — repeats twice, its falling tone and syncopated beat are duplicated first on piano, then on guitar.

Here and throughout the work Mr. Johnson's music is playful and engaging; only gradually do you realize "Americans" is also a sophisticated examination of the way immigrants negotiate cultural isolation and assimilation. Intentionally or not, the piece also shows how the electric guitar maintains its own character and connotations even when completely integrated into a mixed ensemble.