

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: Four recitals (May 30-June 1)

by James Flood, Daniel Hathaway & Mike Telin

The three-day event formerly known as Classical Guitar Weekend was relaunched as the Cleveland International Guitar Festival this year. Running from Friday, May 30 through Sunday, June 1 at the Cleveland Institute of Music, the festival included masterclasses, lectures, workshops and exhibitions — and five recitals by world-class artists.

ClevelandClassical correspondents covered four of the five performances. Their reviews appear below. (We were unable to attend Saturday evening's performance by SoloDuo.)

Petra Polácková

by James Flood



Czech guitarist Petra Polácková took the stage for the festival's opening recital on Friday evening, May 30, with her 8-string Romantic period guitar, a replica by Jan Tulacek of an 1840 instrument by the Viennese builder N.G. Ries. The instrument's appearance, with two extra strings placed conspicuously well above the guitar neck, along with its unique body shape, would catch the attention of even a complete newcomer to the classical

guitar. But the sound was what was even more striking. The smaller body lessened the lower end frequencies, but the instrument had a beguilingly sweet sound. And the character of the guitar fit the character of the performance.

Polácková's stage presence is one of seriousness, gentleness, and ardor. She often plays with eyes closed in a quest for the perfect expression for the moment. The opening Dowland pieces, *Preludium* and *Lacrimae Antiquae* were heartfelt and languid. She played the humorously self-effacing title, *Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens* (*Always Dowland, Always Doleful*) with properly restrained English passion.

The *Bardenklänge*, op. 13 by Johann Kaspar Mertz followed. The first movement *An Malvina* is mostly a flowing arpeggiated work with the melody woven within. Polackova played with unabashed rubato, true to an early romantic style, and to beautiful effect. The slow movement, *Abenlied*, was played with complete delicacy. In these movements, Polackova achieved the kind of intimacy with the audience where it seemed that all were giving undivided attention to her musical communication.

Mauro Giuliani's *Rossiana V*, op. 123, is a medley of personally embellished Rossini arias. The piece demands a number of mood shifts and a broad range of dynamics which were nicely achieved. The work also showed Polácková's virtuosic capabilities.

In another Mertz work, *Elegie*, Polácková captured the broadness and sense of tragedy inherent in the piece. Romantic pieces of Mertz seemed to be where Polackova shined the brightest. Nothing was overdone; she simply conveyed a sincere and heartfelt sense of the music's aspirations.

For the final two works of the program — 20th century Spanish pieces by Manuel Ponce and Joaquin Turina — Polácková brought out a modern guitar she borrowed from the ample collection of Guitars International's high-end concert guitars. The *Sonata III* of Manuel Ponce is a highly chromatic, three-movement work that makes numerous demands on the guitarist's left hand, including several awkward reaches. Polácková negotiated the work's technical intricacies with fine control, executing dynamics and melodic shaping in minute detail.

A somewhat steady sprinkling of buzzed and muted notes here and there throughout the program detracted little from the recital's musical enchantment and the overall impression of Polácková's technical prowess.

She closed with Turina's *Sevillana (Fantasia)*, op. 29 which in typical Turina fashion fuses classical with flamenco. The flamenco *resgueado* (strumming) techniques are always a crowd-pleaser. Polackova executed some good scale work and an arresting soft section which was soon followed with a nice climax of the opening material.

Returning for an encore of Tarrega's *Adelita*, Polácková was charming when she finally spoke, thanking the audience, acknowledging Armin Kelly for bringing her to Cleveland and for letting her use one of his guitars, and announcing that this was her first American performance.

Nigel North, lute, and Carrie Henneman Shaw

by Daniel Hathaway



On Saturday afternoon, May 31, the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival turned its attention to the guitar's cousin, the lute, as Carrie Henneman Shaw and Nigel North performed a recital of sixteenth century songs written to be sung along with that ubiquitous household instrument, plus lute pieces and fantasies based on those tunes.

The program was somewhat geographically organized, beginning with French chansons by Claudin de Sermisy and Clement Lanequin, then swinging down the coast to Italy for selections by Cipriano de Rore, Francesco da Milano, Filippo Azzaiolo, Joanambrosio Delzaa, Bartolomeo Tromboncino and Marchetto Cara, then doubling back for a mix of French and Italian music by Pierre Sandrin, Albert de Rippe, Philippe Verdelot and ending in England with songs and instrumental music by Philippe van Wilder, Thomas Ravenscroft, John Johnson, John Dowland and Thomas Campion. I write "somewhat geographically organized" because lutenists were very portable and worked all over Europe no matter where they were born.

Nigel North has appeared before during Classical Guitar Weekend (the predecessor to the current festival) and played a few years ago at the Cleveland summer meeting of the Lute Society of America. Carrie Henneman Shaw and North appeared together a year ago February with Les Délices in a concert jointly sponsored by the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society.

Both musicians sang seated, using music stands, which concentrated all one's attention on the words and music, and happily, Shaw and North form an exquisite team who shape poetic lines and phrases with elegance and subtlety. Though Mixon Hall is not a large space and its acoustics are lovely, it still seems vast for this repertoire. As the recital unfolded, I found myself wishing I were listening in a far more intimate room, especially for the solo lute pieces in which a lot of detail got lost. And perhaps also wishing for a bit more variety in the selections — a procession of songs about the cruelty of love was relieved only by a few pieces which broke up the pattern: a raunchy little number by Janequin, a rhythmic street song by Azziolo and Ravenscroft's ballad, *There were three ravens*. Those were fun.

Robert Gruca

Jason Vieaux and Julien Labro

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, June 1, the 14th edition of the Festival concluded with two remarkable recitals. Those of us who had the pleasure of hearing both were treated to a fascinating musical collage that began with works by two Elizabethan composers and concluded with an electrifying rendition of Tears for Fears's 1985 hit *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*.

Robert Gruca is a guitarist who brings a keen sense of musical narrative to all that he plays. He began his 2:45 performance with a set of lute songs that included *Pavan* and *Galliard* "My Lady Mildemays Delight" by Robert Johnson, followed by John Dowland's *Frog Galliard*. Gruca performed each song with panache, tossing of the numerous fast and furious technical passages with ease.

Gruca proved himself to be a distinguished interpreter of music from the baroque era during Handel's *Suite no. 7 in G minor HWV 432*. Originally written for harpsichord, the work presents some interesting technical challenges to the performer when played on the

guitar — lines that are easy to play on a keyboard are not so easy to play on a plucked instrument. In spite of these hurdles, Gruca's performance of the five-movement work was utterly charming. The Allegro had great direction of phrase and the final Passacaille was full of color changes.

The recital continued its chronological journey with a nuanced reading of Paraguayan composer Agustin Barrios *Mangoré's* extremely popular *La Catedral*. Anyone who attends even a small number of classical guitar recitals each year will undoubtedly encounter this work more than once. However, Gruca's attention to detail resulted in a performance that was fresh and new.

Following intermission it was on to the 20th century with *Joaquín Rodrigo's* homage to *Manuel de Falla, Invocacion y Danza*. Dating from 1961, Gruca's account of this somewhat dark and brooding work was mesmerizing. It also made a perfect prelude to Afro-Cuban composer *Leo Brouwer's El Decameron Negro* (Black Decameron). Written for and premiered by Sharon Isbin in 1983, the programmatic work is considered to be one of the most important recent additions to the guitar repertoire. The three movements — "El arpa del guerrero" (The Warrior's Harp), "La huida de los amantes por el valle de los ecos" (Flight of the Lovers through the Valley of Echoes) and "Balada de la doncella enamorada" (Ballad of the Young Girl in Love) are all based on African love stories and Gruca's performance vividly brought each tale to life.

Gruca concluded the afternoon with a spirited performance of Argentine composer Jorge Morel's *Sonatina*. However the large audience who had gathered on that sunny afternoon wanted more and Gruca graciously obliged with a lively performance of Agustin Barrios *Mangoré's Danza Paraguaya*.



The evolution of classical guitar music continued at 7:30 when guitarist Jason Vieaux was joined by his frequent collaborator Julien Labro on bandoneón, accordion and

accordina. One always hopes the final concert of a festival will be something special that sends audiences home in anticipation of the next edition and Vieaux and Labro did not disappoint.

Given the two began their musical partnership with their 2011 celebrated recording on the Azica label titled *The Music of Astor Piazzolla*, it was fitting for them to begin their program with a work by the father of Tango Nuevo. Composed in 1986, *Histoire du Tango* consists of four movements that describe the evolution of Tango. Vieaux and Labro performed the first, “Bordel 1900” and the fourth, “Concert d’Aujourd’hui”.

Originally scored for flute and guitar, the piece is often performed in various instrumental combinations (guitar and bandoneón for this performance) Now for my dirty little secret: I have always hated this piece. That was, until last Sunday night. In the hands of two accomplished musicians who are well-versed in both classical and jazz, Vieaux and Labro’s performance captured the essence of Tango Nuevo. As they would throughout the evening the dynamic duo performed from one musical mind – all unison technical passages, no matter how fast, were perfectly in sync. And they were obviously having a lot of fun during some extended improvisations.

The four movements of the *Suite Retratos* by the 20th century Brazilian composer of classical and popular music Radamés Gnattali pays homage to pioneers of Brazilian *choro*. Switching to the chromatic button accordion, Labro joined Vieaux to perform the music’s syncopated fast rhythmic changes with virtuosity and to bring out the intricate counterpoint that characterizes *choro*. Their teamwork as they moved in and out of the waltz theme during “Ernesto Nazareth” was remarkable and the speed at which they took final “Chiquinha Gonzaga” was astonishing. Again the two performers reveled in every opportunity to improvise.

Following intermission came Pat Metheny’s *Antonia* which featured heartfelt, extended solos by Labro on the accordina. Written in 1958 for guitar and orchestra, Leo Brouwer’s *Tres Danzas Concertantes* did, as Tom Poore wrote in his program notes, seem like the “odd man out” on the program. Written when the composer was only 19, the three-movement work lacks the compositional maturity of his later works. Still, Vieaux gave a compelling performance, and Labro, now back on accordion, was a fitting replacement for the orchestra.

The final work brought the performers back to Piazzolla and Labro back to bandoneon. Dating from 1978, *Escualo* (Shark) was written for Piazzolla’s longtime band member and friend, violinist Fernando Suarez Paz. Introducing the piece, Jason Vieaux told the audience that the key to the evening’s program was finding music that worked for their combination of instruments. Well, this piece certainly worked. Vieaux and Labro’s high energy playing achieved an even higher level.

Of course the large crowd was not going to allow it to end there. And just when you thought it couldn't get any better, it did. Jason Vieaux and Julien Labro (with accordina) returned to the stage and the second Vieaux played the opening of the Tears for Fears classic, there were more than a few audible laughs from the audience: would the final piece performed at the Festival really be *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*? Yes it was, and what a performance it was, complete with a wild, extended, harmonically crazed improvisation by Labro. Vieaux and Labro may not rule the world, but on Sunday evening they certainly ruled Mixon Hall.

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