

Preview**Classical Guitar Weekend:
a conversation with Raphaella Smits**

by Daniel Hathaway



Belgian guitarist Raphaella Smits will be making her fourth visit to Cleveland for this year's Classical Guitar Weekend to play a solo recital in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music on Saturday, May 25 at 4:30 and to conduct a master class on Thursday, May 23 at 2:00 pm. A frequent visitor to our shores, Smits has made some 95 solo and educational appearances during her distinguished career, which includes having been the first woman to win Spain's prestigious Certamen Internacional de Guitarra Fran-

cisco Tarrega Competition.

We reached Raphaella Smits via Skype video conference at her home outside Antwerp. Of course I have to ask her first if she admires Rubens's paintings.

RS: Yes of course. They are everywhere. We are living about ten minutes outside town and we're lucky to have a really huge, beautiful garden. It's spring and all the leaves and flowers are out.

Daniel Hathaway: I've been reading about how you got started on the guitar, but it would be fun for you to tell us that again in your own words! What first attracted you to the instrument?

Raphaella Smits: Why not! In the beginning I wasn't attracted to it at all because I didn't even know it existed. But I grew up with a lot of culture. My father was a sculptor who played the violin in an excellent way, but not professionally. My mother was a piano player but not professionally. My brother and I went to a school where you got lots of arts and music besides the other subjects, so when my music teacher said at a certain moment that I had to start on an instrument, I asked for the cello but I was too small. He said, why don't you play the viola da gamba? In those days it was not an instrument that was very common. You couldn't go to the shop and buy one. Time went by and the instrument didn't arrive yet, so my mother said, "She sings so lovely why don't we give her a guitar so she can play along?"

My teacher was not a guitarist so he went to a concert in town and came back and said, “I know how you do it. You put a big phone book under your foot, you hold the guitar on your left leg and put your left hand here, and that's how you play the guitar!” After four months he told my parents, “You have to send her to a guitar teacher,” but he told them, “it doesn't really matter; she'll become a guitar player anyway”. So that's how I started, and then it went very very fast from one day to the other.

DH: How popular is the guitar in the Low Countries?

RS: The classical guitar is the second most popular instrument. We have waiting lists for guitar teachers for children and my class at the institute in Leuven is absolutely packed. I've been teaching in that school for 27 years and I always have to refuse students.

DH: And you never made it back to study the gamba.

RS: No, I never even started. I really love the sound of the guitar. I sang in the choir of the opera and later on I was a freelance singer and sang in professional choirs, but in the end I just play the guitar.

DH: It's an excellent guitar weekend that Armin Kelly organizes in Cleveland.

RS: It is, and I hear that Mixon Hall is exceptional.

DH: Your recital program is quite interesting — and serious! You have elegies on each side of the two large Bach pieces.

RS: It's true. The first piece is Fernando Sor's *Élégiaque*. It's an elegy to one of his students who died in childbirth. He was much moved by that. It's one of his last works and it's very much like Beethoven, very deep and very romantic. What I like especially about it is the middle section with fragments of church music. I played it a few days ago in Holland and time after time people were in tears.

The second piece is the Bach *Violin Partita No. 2* with the famous *Chaconne*. Sometimes it's played alone but I must say the whole piece is really moving. In the second half, I start with a Suite by Bach that most guitarists know. I take the original cello version and adapt it for my eight-string guitar. Then the finale is two big works by Mertz, the *Elegie* and *Le Romantique, Grande Fantasia*. So two big works by Bach and beginning and ending with beautiful Romantic works.

DH: What do you have to do to make a violin or cello piece work on the guitar?

RS: You can never imitate the violin or cello, of course, because the sound has such different qualities. But it has to end up sounding like it was written for the guitar.

DH: It promises to be a fascinating program and you have a very interesting guitar to play it on.

RS: You informed yourself!

DH: Armin told me to ask you about it.

RS: It's a very exceptional guitar from 1830 restored by Bernhard Kresse eight or nine years ago. I've had it for quite some time.

DH: How many guitars do you have in your closet?

RS: It's a nice collection, but I'll only be bringing the one to Cleveland.

DH: You'll also be teaching a master class. What advice do you find yourself giving to students time after time?

RS: There is never a master class where I don't have to repeat myself to tell them they have to learn to listen more carefully. To make beautiful music is to learn the language of music, which has changed little by little from the Renaissance to today. Now the technique of understanding the music is different but the meaning of music is the same. It's all about the communication and the understanding.

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