

Preview

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: an interview with David Russell

by Mike Telin



On Saturday, March 29 beginning at 7:30 pm in Plymouth Church, Cleveland Classical Guitar Society presents internationally acclaimed classical guitarist David Russell in a concert featuring works by Giuliani, Scarlatti, Granados, Bach and Albéniz. At 6:45 students from the CCGS education program will perform a program under the direction of Teaching Artist Mike McNamara.

Considered one of today's preeminent musical performers, David Russell received a Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance (without orchestra) for his 2004 recording of "Aire Latino." His many additional awards include being named a Fellow of The Royal Academy of Music in London and having a conservatory hall and a street in Spain named after him.

While preparing for our conversation I read a number of interviews with David Russell and nearly all the interviewers commented on what a genuinely nice, down to earth guy he is. And I must concur. I reached David Russell by telephone in San Francisco and began by asking him about how he makes his programming decisions.

David Russell: I have to choose pieces that go well together. Sometimes you can choose from a purely intellectual point of view, then you go out and play them and they just don't mix. Or as a player I don't feel like playing the next one after I finished another. So I usually have to juggle the order until it feels right for me and what is going to be of enjoyment to the audience.

I usually like to have a fair amount of variety from different styles of music. Partly because the audience comes from many different walks of life, but also for my personal enjoyment. Sometimes it depends on what I'm recording at the moment – if I'm recording Bach, there might be a lot more Bach on the program than normal. It really just changes every year.

Mike Telin: Your program does not keep with the chronological order either.

DR: I don't use chronology as the logic. I think there was a time, especially if you were playing lots of small pieces, when the chronological order was a logical order, but it didn't mean it was a musical order.

Most of the pieces [on this program] are not small. The Giuliani (*Rossiniana No. 3*) is a big piece. The Bach (*Partita No. 1*) and the Granados (*Valses Poéticos*) are also large works, so the chronological order no longer is necessary.

You also have to make sure that one piece doesn't kill the next. If you play the *Chaconne* of Bach it's probably best that the next thing be the interval.

MT: The Scarlatti and the Granados are your transcriptions: what are the challenges of transferring them from the keyboard to the guitar?

DR: There's a technical challenge and sometimes to make a piece work we need to extend our technique. But above that there are a whole range of emotions that you can find in Scarlatti's music. But the transcriptions that I am playing are very close to all of the notes he wrote he the keyboard.

The first one (*K. 490*) is a powerful, deep piece. We tend to think of his music as light, but he wrote quite a few sonatas that have deep emotional content. It's a song that is sung during Holy Week when they take the statue of the Virgin Mary through the streets. The second sonata (*K. 491*) is a Fandango. So although it's from three hundred years ago the dances still exist

This pair works very well together. They are both strongly influenced by Spanish music: Scarlatti lived in Seville for a long time. So its interesting because of the historic connection, and for me, these are my favorite of his sonatas.

Then you jump to the Granados, which is pure romance of the Spanish style. And although they both come from the keyboard I think they work very well on the guitar.

My view of transcription is that if the piece loses too much when we pass it on to the guitar, it's better not to do it. But for example with the Scarlatti, the guitar has a tonal and volume range that the harpsichord doesn't have. So we can add something. I won't say that it makes it better, but gives you a new view of the piece.

The same is true with the Granados. Although perhaps a pianist can play it faster, the singing qualities of the guitar that you can bring to the piece are worth it. I have transcribed many pieces and then said, No I'm not going to do this because you do realize that it is better on the original instrument.

MT: Regarding guitar competitions, you said that there is a difference between playing to win and playing to enchant an audience.

DR: Nowadays I think the young players who have the ability to win competitions have an advantage because it is difficult to find work — to find presenters who will book you on their series. And if you have a few competition wins it is like a presentation card. It proves they are at a certain standard but it doesn't prove they are going to be able to en-

chant an audience. But the standard of the young people now days is fantastic, so those who are winning competitions are wonderful players.

When I did competitions there were only a few so if you did win one it almost put you on the map. Now just in the United States there are a whole series of them and the same in Europe, and Japan and all over the place.

Also if a player wins a competition, hopefully they will get a few thousand dollars and use that to continue studying and not have to take a job that wears them down. So I do think they're a good thing in that sense.

MT: And there are so many great performances that you can easily find on the Internet.

DR: Nowadays there is so much communication, you can live in Azerbaijan, get on YouTube and hear someone play on the [other side of the world]. Before we would have to travel a long way to hear someone play a concert.

The sharing of information is also much greater then it was before, which has its good sides and bad sides. The good side is that students get to see and hear everything. The not so good side is that it's more difficult to be special.

MT: Final question — and this has nothing to do with music and you don't need to answer: what was your time at this year's Berlin Marathon?

DR: I've run it three times, but the last was 4:45. My wife and I run it together and we've now run four marathons and we always cross the finish line hand in hand. If one of us is having a bad day the other will slow down. One year I was really bad, kind of ill and shouldn't have been running, but Maria dragged me along. The next year she had a pain in her knee so I dragged her along. We don't do it to try to make a time, we do it to energize the many months before. And the marathon give us a goal. It's a challenge and it's difficult but it's a fun party. The goal is to train and keep ourselves fit.

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