

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: a conversation with Antonis Hatzinikolaou

by Mike Telin



For the past seventeen years, the [Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival](#) has provided a stage for many guitarists to make their United States debuts. One of those artists is [Antonis Hatzinikolaou](#).

“This is my second time at the Festival,” he said by telephone from his home in Greece. “It’s one of the best. It’s not only high-quality in terms of music — the organization is amazing and all the people are very nice. There’s so much happening: concerts, master classes, and demonstrations. And there are instruments to try as well.” Click [here](#) to view the full Festival schedule.

On Sunday, June 10 at 2:30 pm in CIM’s Mixon Hall, CIGCF will present Antonis Hatzinikolaou in a solo program of works by Britten, Paganini, Pujol, Torroba, and Weiss. Tickets are available [online](#).

“We guitarists like to get together as often as possible,” Hatzinikolaou said. “I guess it’s like that with everybody — when they have something they really like, they like to talk about it and share with other people.”

The guitarist said something he looks forward to sharing with his colleagues and the audience is his transcription of Sylvius Leopold Weiss’ *Suite in c*, a Baroque dance suite originally written for the lute.

“It was an experiment for me because I was trying different tunings and playing with [scordatura](#). But without knowing it at the time, I ended up tuning the guitar more or

less like a lute. Of course it would be silly for me to imply that I achieved the beautiful sound of the lute — not at all — but I think I managed to get as close as I possibly could with only six strings. With this tuning the guitar produces an interesting sonority and I can't wait to find out how it will sound in that beautiful hall.”

The guitarist likened his discovery to finding life on Mars. “But when I did some research I found out that a guitarist by the name of Victor van Puijenbroek first tried this tuning back in the ‘60s. He was one of Raphaella Smits’ teachers and many of his arrangements have been published, but not many people know about him. Mine is not based on his because I discovered this afterwards.”

Hatzinikolaou went on to explain that the first four strings of his guitar will be tuned to the same intervals as the lute, but a minor third lower. “I use a [capo](#) on the first fret so it sounds in the key of c minor, but I’m reading it in the original b minor. It’s a little bit complicated because for many years you play particular notes on particular frets, and then all of a sudden everything changes, so I’ll be playing from music just to be safe.”

The Weiss will set the mood for Benjamin Britten’s *Nocturnal*, Op. 70, a theme and variations based on John Dowland’s *Come, Heavy Sleep*. “Britten’s work actually concludes with the Dowland theme, and if it were the other way around I don’t think it would have the same effect,” Hatzinikolaou said. “As the title suggests, it’s about dreams. People have many different thoughts about the meaning of each variation, but I think it’s a metaphorical piece.”

In addition to the Weiss, another of Hatzinikolaou’s arrangements will be Paganini’s *Grand Sonata*, a work originally written for violin and guitar. “The story goes that Paganini was playing with a well-known guitarist who asked him to write a piece for guitar and violin, but one where the guitar would have the more interesting part. Paganini came back with this sonata and said that he would play the guitar and the guitarist would play the violin. I’m not sure that any of it is true, but I think it’s a nice story.”

Hatzinikolaou pointed out that Paganini was also a guitarist, and there was a period of his life when he didn’t play the violin because he was in a relationship with a woman whose favorite instrument was the guitar. “He was a magician and had his tricks to impress people — he would intentionally break his violin strings and play everything on one string. He was a poser and nothing like me, but I like the piece very much and I hope people will enjoy it.”

Next on the program is Federico Moreno Torroba's *Castillos de España*, a work written for Andrés Segovia. Hatzinikolaou imagines the piece as a series of small postcards from Spain. "I think that originally there were fourteen but I will play eight. They are short, maybe two minutes each, and are programmatic in nature and have a sweetness in sound. They are a bit neglected so somebody has to play them."

Emilio Pujol's *Tres piezas españolas* will conclude the evening. "Three dances to celebrate the Festival."

Hatzinikolaou's interest in the guitar extends beyond playing it to building and polishing the instruments. "I really am in love with the guitar," he said. "It's not just the music, it's the instrument that is attractive to me. If I have the opportunity to be with a luthier I always ask questions. I have quite a few tools at home and maybe one day I'll build a guitar — who knows? When I've done the polishing I've had somebody with me — I wouldn't do it on my own just yet, but it's a pleasurable experience. When you do something with your hands like woodworking or French polishing, it's so grounding. My great grandfather was a woodworker — he made boats — so I think it comes from my family. I'm good with tools, and I'm always careful."

The multi-faceted Hatzinikolaou also has a keen interest in Nuevo Tango and was a founding member of the Fugata Quintet, an ensemble specializing in the music of Piazzolla. "We were all students at the Royal Academy of Music when we formed the group. We all liked Piazzolla so we decided to give it a go. I think it shaped the way that I perform my solo concerts. While there are many wonderful arrangements of his music for solo guitar, it's hard to be free because the music is so dense. But when each instrument has its own role, then you have room to play with the rhythm. It's very nice to play with *rubato*, but in time and with each other. It was a great lesson and of course we became friends — we are still so close."

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