

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: a conversation with Celino Romero

by Mike Telin



“He was such a powerful romantic guy who wrote beautiful poems,” Celino Romero said, recalling his grandfather Celedonio Romero, who with his sons Celin, Pepe, and Angel founded the legendary guitar quartet [The Romeros](#) 60 years ago.

On Sunday, November 18 at 2:30 pm in Finney Chapel, “The Royal Family of the Guitar” will return to Northeast Ohio for a concert on the Oberlin Artist Recital Series. The program will include works by Albéniz, de Falla, Villa-Lobos, Granados, and both Celedonio and Pepe Romero. Tickets are available [online](#).

“60 years, isn’t that crazy?” [Celino Romero](#) said by telephone from his home in San

Diego. “It blows my mind. But what really blew my mind was when I realized that I have been in the quartet one year longer than my uncle Angel was. When I started in 1990 it was my grandfather, my uncle Pepe, my father Celin, and myself. When my grandfather got sick in ‘95, Angel’s son Lito — who was already playing a lot with his father — joined the group.”

Celino said that today’s audiences enjoy seeing the different generations on stage. “They love to see the father, the son, the uncle, and the cousin. Back in the day, the concerts were pretty serious — there was not a lot of talking. But nowadays, I like to communicate because people want to hear about our family history and the music.”

The guitarist said that he’s also touched when people share their remembrances of concerts from 20 or 30 years ago. And he’s especially happy when they tell him how

the group's signature sound has remained the same. He has a pretty good idea why that is.

“Growing up, I would take a month off from elementary school and travel the United States. Lito and I would pretend we were part of the group. When I joined I took Angel's part, so I thought OK, I've got to sound a little bit like my uncle. And when Lito came in, he sounded very much like my grandfather. We just had it in our blood and in our ears from 25 years of traveling with and listening to the original quartet.”

Sunday's program is organized in the traditional Romeros fashion — each half will begin and end with a quartet, with solos and duos in between. “The program really is an afternoon of Spanish greatest hits, but I think it's fitting. It's been so long since we've played in the Cleveland area and it will be nice for the audience to hear all of these great pieces.”



One of Celino's solo works will be “Fantasía cubana” from his grandfather's *Suite Andaluza*. “I like to improvise a little bit so it changes every concert,” he said. “My grandfather couldn't stand having the audience sitting down, he wanted them on their feet. He'd always say, ‘let's get the people standing up.’ And this is one that gets everybody going.”

Another audience favorite is Pepe Romero's arrangement of the “Introduction” and “Fandango” from Luigi Boccherini's *Guitar Quintet in D*. “My uncle's arrangement

for the quartet is so beautiful, and always moves people. Boccherini was an Italian, but this is Spanish music and the Fandango's got a lot of power."

The concert will close with Pepe Romero's *Suite flamenca*. Celino said that the "En el Sacromonte" movement depicts the life of the "Gypsies in the hills of Spain." He added that the piece is a little psychedelic and very layered. "It's tough even though it isn't fast, but it has become one of my all-time favorites to play."

He said that "Colombianas," like its title suggests, is full of Colombian rhythms. "My uncle has turned into quite the composer. He bought a house in the hills of Granada, which is beautiful and has inspired his composing. He was born playing flamenco and then turned to classical, so he is returning to his flamenco roots. And like my grandfather, he likes to write these pieces that are exciting and make people want to jump up."

Another work that never fails to get people going is Celedonio Romero's *Malagueñas*. "If we don't play this in a concert, we get a lot of angry audience members. I think the piece really captures the life of Spain — there's so much energy and romance, and fire, and *Malagueñas* captures that with its rhythms. It's like classical meets flamenco. There's a power to it, but it's not complicated, and it's one of the timeless pieces that people want to hear over and over. We usually save it for the encore."

Playing music that gets people going has come with a few unexpected happenings. "Once during a concert a woman got up on stage and started dancing. The audience didn't know what was going on but she pulled it off — she was a flamenco dancer and she was great. So, it's not only the rock guys — us classical guys have some crazy stories too."

I asked Celino about his grandfather, and it was quite clear from his response what a guiding force he was, and still is, on the quartet. "The one wish that I have is that I would have been more experienced when he was playing onstage with me. In 1990 when Angel left the quartet, I had to jump in. My first concert was at the Greek Theater in Hollywood and my dad had to basically push me out to play a solo. I didn't want to go, I just wanted to play in the quartet."

Celino said that he never saw his grandfather show signs of being nervous. "He would tell me in such a calming way, 'Celino, it doesn't matter, just go have fun.' He always sat next to me onstage and I would watch him, and if anything would go wrong, he would look at the audience. And his posture — he played the guitar in an upright position versus hunched over. I loved that and I copied it."

In 1996 the Romeros were scheduled for an extensive tour of Germany, but Celedonio became quite ill and was not able to travel. The tour included a performance at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. “He never played there, but it was always his dream. He didn’t last. I remember a moment alone with him — he told me, ‘about the nerves, you have to take them and make them a positive.’ He said, ‘Celino, when things fail and I’m not there onstage with you’ — this is the most beautiful thing — he said, ‘I want you to close your eyes and think of me, and let me put your hands where they need to go.’ That was the last thing he said to me before I went to Germany. Even today there are times every once in a while when I’m tired and I do close my eyes and I feel his presence, I feel his energy.”

Celino said there were many incredible moments in that tour, one of them during the concert at the Gewandhaus. He and Lito were slated to perform a duo for the first time, and all was well until the day of the concert. “For some reason we just couldn’t play it. I said to Lito, ‘we can’t practice it anymore, we’re just making ourselves freak out.’ Before we went on, we closed our eyes and thought of how lucky we are to be part of this family, and how Celedonio would put our hands where they needed to go. So we walked onstage and smiled at each other, and we both knew it was going to be okay — and that was by far the best performance of the piece we ever did. So to say that my grandfather isn’t onstage with us anymore isn’t quite true.”

Celino hopes that the lineage will continue into the next generation — perhaps his daughter or his son, also named Celedonio, will follow in the family footsteps. “My father is Celedonio the second, I’m Celedonio the third, and my son is Celedonio the fourth.”

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