

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival — chatting with Lynn McGrath

by Mike Telin



Necessity is the mother of invention, and when guitarist Lynn McGrath needed to figure out how to simultaneously play the music and recite the poetry of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, she found a way to do it.

On Friday, June 7 at 6:30 pm in Studio 113 at the Cleveland Institute of Music, [Lynn McGrath](#) will present a lecture recital titled “Guitar With Spoken Word.” The program features selections from Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s *Platero y yo* (Platero and I). The free event is

presented as part of the [Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival](#).

Inspired by the 1914 book by the Nobel Prize-winning author Juan Ramon Jiménez, [Platero y yo](#) tells the story of a poet and his silvery gray donkey, the poet’s traveling companion and confidant. The pieces describe events in the lives of the two characters as they reflect on the people and places they visit around their Spanish village.

“The work is actually a four-volume set of 28 chapters that Castelnuovo-Tedesco set for Spanish narration and classical guitar,” McGrath said by telephone from the Eastman Community Music School in Rochester.

Prior to embarking on her music career, McGrath earned degrees in Spanish language and literature, so when she began looking for a project for her final doctoral lecture recital at the University of Southern California, turning to Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s work seemed like a no-brainer. “I thought, this piece is perfect. I love the Spanish language and literature, I love animals and nature, and the poetry is so beautiful.”

Indeed, it was a perfect fit — what could possibly go wrong?

At that time, McGrath was working at the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam, and with a narrator lined up, she was preparing to fly back to USC to complete her final exams. “But I literally did not have enough money to fly my narrator to Los Angeles,” she recalled. “So I thought, well, I speak Spanish — is it possible for me to do both — narrate and play at the same time? Everyone said that I was crazy — it’s too much multitasking. It was challenging at first, but I approached it very slowly and worked it up over a period of about four months. I did the lecture recital and I’ve been playing it ever since. It’s a great way to share so many of the things that I love with an audience.”

McGrath said that learning to do that multitasking was a challenge, but given that she had already learned the guitar part, it made the process somewhat easier. “When I realized that I was going to have to perform the narration, I memorized it. I also had a copy of the manuscript, so I would look at it, hear it in my head, and speak the words. Then, when I played the music, I would also hear the words in my head. It was like the visualization or audiation of a missing part, and gradually I was able to do both at the same time.”

The guitarist said that the process was akin to setting a metronome at 60 and little-by-little quickening the tempo, but like a vocalist, she also had to figure out where to breathe. “I needed to get it up to speed pretty fast so I could figure out how to keep the line of the narration flowing. Over the years I’ve added more chapters to my repertoire and I have streamlined my approach, and now I do learn both the music and the words at the same time, which I have found is a better way to do it.”

Musically speaking, McGrath said the piece is challenging to interpret well. “I just love Tedesco’s music and it’s enlightening to see how he uses the motive of a trotting donkey. He creates a mood that describes how gentle and sweet the donkey is with cascading slurred passages, and he uses dissonant chords to represent its strong side.”

To play and narrate also requires an extra amount of focus and energy. “I need to stay in the moment in order to pull it off because all of my pistons are firing at the same time.”

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