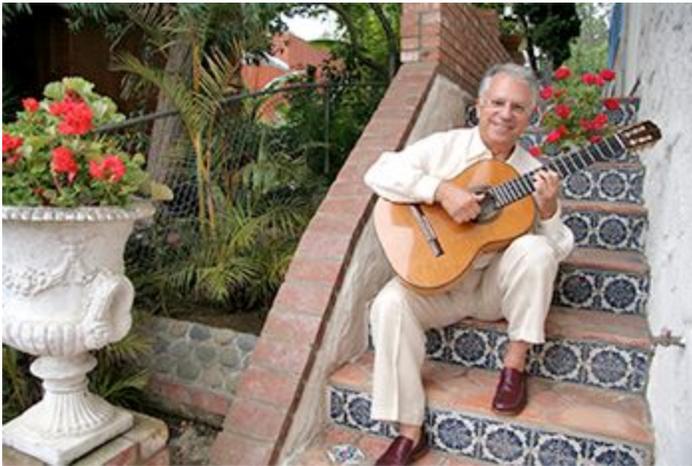


**Summers@Severance:  
Pepe Romero & Thierry Fischer (July 19)**

by Timothy Robson



There were unexpected changes in July 19th's Summers@Severance concert due to the illness of previously announced conductor Pablo Heras-Casado and the substitution of Swiss conductor Thierry Fischer, who is currently music director of the Utah Symphony. This necessitated a change in program as well: Debussy's *La Mer* was played instead of the same composer's *Iberia*.

These summer concerts are usually a bit over an hour in length, with no intermission. In this case the program was 95 minutes of music straight through — almost a full-length concert — and it had everything: familiar tunes, a brilliant soloist in guitarist Pepe Romero, and one of the most famous and dramatic works from the French impressionist period.

The star of the show was Romero, one of the great classical guitar virtuosos of our time. The son of Caledonia Romero and brother to Celin and Angel, the four collectively comprise “The Romeros.” Romero was soloist in Joaquín Rodrigo's familiar *Concierto de Aranjuez*, first performed in 1940 and given its first performance in the United States by The Cleveland Orchestra in 1949.

Romero conquered the concerto's technical challenges long ago, allowing the listener to revel in his exquisite musicianship. Rodrigo's colorful scoring is a model of restraint. The guitar, which was very discreetly amplified, is not a loud instrument, so the composer uses very thin orchestration, often in diverse registers, only utilizing the full ensemble when the soloist was either silent or just adding to the orchestral texture.

Cellist Richard Weiss and English hornist Robert Walters shone in their major solos. This same concerto is on the program at Blossom Music Center on Sunday, July 21, but the Severance Hall audience may have gotten the better deal. We were able to hear the subtleties of the soloist's interaction with the orchestra, as well as the overall musical details in the perfect acoustics of Severance Hall.

Romero returned after a lengthy ovation to play a short but virtuosic encore, *Fantasia Cubana* by his father, Celedonio Romero.



The program opened with an orchestral suite from Bizet's *Carmen*. Although the opera was not an initial success, it has claimed its place as an audience favorite, and the two orchestral suites, from which Thierry Fischer selected seven movements, gave us most of the opera's favorite melodies. There was the toreador music and the fate motif

from the overture, *Carmen's* "Seguidilla," the exquisite "Entr'acte" that separates Acts 2 and 3, a "Nocturne" (Micaela's aria, with the vocal line played with lyrical beauty by concertmaster Peter Otto), "Aragonaise," and the rollicking Act 2 "Danse bohème" in the smuggler's den. The "Entr'acte" fared the best, with its delicacy and light touch. The balances in the louder movements tended to favor the brass at the expense of the rest of the ensemble.

Debussy's *La Mer* is stitched into the fabric of The Cleveland Orchestra, which has given it many performances and made several recordings of the piece since they first performed it in 1927. Thierry Fischer's interpretation was overtly sensuous and uncommonly colorful, the waves of Debussy's sonic ocean pouring over the audience. The many solos are intrinsic to the work, as well as Debussy's fascinating combinations and layers of sound. The brass occasionally dominated, as in the *Carmen* suite, but otherwise, this was a highly enjoyable performance.

After the concert, dance music was booming and drinks were to be had in the Severance Hall lobby and on the front terrace, but with an outdoor temperature hovering about 90 degrees at 8:30 pm, and high humidity, a retreat to my air-conditioned car and home prevailed.

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