

Contemporary Guitar Duo FretX to play at Transformer Station

by Mike Telin



There are many reasons musicians decide to form an ensemble. For the contemporary guitar duo FretX, [Mak Grgic](#) and [Daniel Lippel](#), it was the need to borrow an instrument. “I first met Mak through Peter Robles of Serious Music Media,” Lippel said during a telephone conversation. “He needed to borrow an electric guitar for a performance. I knew Peter and he hooked him up with me. We started talking and Peter suggested that we play a duo concert sometime and we thought it was a cool idea. The thing is, Mak lives in Los Angeles and I’m in New York, so this is a both coasts duo. The logistics have a way of framing the nature of the group, but it’s working out.”

On Monday, February 27 at 7:30 pm at Transformer Station, the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Performing Arts Series will present FretX. The concert will include works by Courtney Bryan, Laura Schwartz, Gity Razaz, Miroslav Tadić, Daniel Lippel, and Helmut Lachenmann. Tickets are available [online](#).

Recognizing the fact that there were already plenty of great guitar duos in the United States, on the advice of Robles, the two guitarists decided to go in a different direction. “There aren’t too many guitar duos that focus on contemporary repertoire,” Lippel said. “There are some in Europe, but I can think of only one or two other duos who are focusing on contemporary music in the U.S. — but their repertoire tends to come from

within the guitar world. Our idea was to focus on works that were being written by non-guitarists.” Lippel added that there is a distinction between music that is written by guitarists versus non-guitarists. “One is not better than the other, they just occupy different spaces.”

The centerpiece of Monday’s program will be Helmut Lachenmann’s groundbreaking *Salut für Caudwell*. “It’s a 25-minute duo that totally transformed the repertoire,” Lippel said. “It’s like he set out to write an anti-guitar duo. Everything the players are doing is stuff you would never think of doing on a guitar. It helps to be a guitarist to play it, but I think even a percussionist could play this piece.”

The work is filled with extended techniques, bottleneck slides, and rhythmic spoken text. The work is a homage to Christopher Caudwell, a British Marxist from the early 20th century. The text fragments are taken from a German translation of one of his books.

“Lippel said that *Salut für Caudwell* feels like a legal brief. “He builds a very persuasive argument for the sound world he has created for the guitar. It’s classic Lachenmann — he brings you in in a way that makes you forget that you’re listening to an instrument that can do so many other things. He’s influenced a lot of composers, but I don’t feel like anybody does it quite like him, or maybe not quite as well. Mak has played it a few times but this is my first. It’s been fun to learn it but it isn’t easy — there’s an extensive key of symbols at the beginning of the score so you need to learn a new vocabulary. But once you begin to understand it, it’s a rewarding piece.”

Lippel described Gity Razaz’s *Four Haikus* as a beautiful, elegantly written piece in the French Overture style. “Her music is getting played more and more, and I’m glad to see that because I think she’s really talented.”

The guitarist said that Courtney Bryan’s *Soli deo Gloria* is a little bit like a fantasy, with vague hints of gospel. “The title references Bach’s inscription on scores, and it has a religious undertone, but the musical material doesn’t jump out at me as having any religious content.”

The Duo’s smorgasbord program will also include solo works. Grgic will perform two contemporary arrangements of Balkan tunes by Miroslav Tadić. “He’s a friend of Mak’s. I just heard them when we played a small show in D.C. They’re really engaging and capture the off-kilter musical flavor of that music.”

Lippel will present two short pieces written in microtonal tunings, Laura Schwartz’s *Miniature Flowering Plants* and his own “Cadences” from *Mirrored Space*.

When asked how he describes microtonality to people who are not versed in the subject, he said that “microtonalists would probably say that all music is microtonal and the only reason we need to point out that something is microtonal as opposed to not, is because of the equal tempered system. But when we say that we’re playing a microtonal piece there is more to it than saying that it’s just any music.”

Lippel explained that in his two pieces he’s using a quarter-tone tuning. “Instead of the third string being G it’s a quarter step down so it’s a $F \frac{3}{4}$ sharp, and the top string, instead of being an E, is a $D \frac{3}{4}$ sharp. When I finger passages across the first and third string it gives me a note in between the chromatic notes, so in a way it gives me a 24-note octave instead of twelve.” He added that the only way to achieve microtonality on a guitar with fixed frets is in the tuning of the strings.

“Mak and I have done performances on instruments with moveable frets. In fact we’ve both made Bach recordings in [Kirnberger III](#), a German temperament from the 18th century. There’s a lot of experimentation with these different temperaments happening in contemporary music.”

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