

Berta Rojas admirably resilient in recital with Cleveland Classical Guitar Society (Apr. 2)

by Stephanie Manning



Guitarist Berta Rojas' in-person appearance at the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, a two-year journey which finally came to fruition on April 2, has not been without some major setbacks. First before her travels, when the pandemic forced Rojas to cancel her trip in March 2020, and second — and most heartbreaking — after her

arrival, when her beloved guitar was stolen on April 1st.

But despite her grief, the Paraguayan guitarist determinedly continued with her recital as scheduled. Playing on an instrument she borrowed from Colin Davin, Rojas captivated audience members at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights with a program that honored two women pioneers of classical guitar: Ida Presti and María Luisa Anido.

Playing on an unfamiliar instrument on such short notice, Rojas was understandably a little tentative, holding back from the loudest dynamics and carefully re-tuning between every piece. But she kept her composure through it all, savoring the plaintive folk melodies of Presti's *Segovia* and the wistful yet mysterious qualities of John Duarte's *Idyll Pour Ida*. And during Presti's *Danse Rythmique*, she was able to inject a little more joy and ease into her performance, skillfully adapting to the instrument with each passing moment.

The opening Allegro of Federico Moreno Torra's *Sonatina* gave the audience the first truly energetic movement of the night. Though the upper end of her dynamic range remained subdued, the soft moments throughout all three movements were exquisite, accentuated by her beautiful phrasing that rose and fell like waves upon a shore.

Post-intermission, Rojas turned her attention to María Luisa Anido, beginning with four works by the trailblazing Argentine guitarist. The nostalgic *Preludio Lejania* and *Aire de Vidalita* transitioned smoothly into the folk-adjacent *Triste No. 1*, concluding with the evocative and haunting *El Misachico*. The last piece, though short, was one of the standouts of the concert — Rojas coaxed out a rich sound in between percussive knocks on the body of the instrument, which represented the drums of a funeral march.

The final piece, *Anido's Portrait*, gave an outside perspective on Anido from composer Sergio Assad. Commissioned by Rojas, the piece danced through four vibrant movements and required the most dexterous finger work from the performer. The technical passages were not without a few minor bumps, but the guitarist always kept the line and the phrasing going.

As the evening came to a close, the soft-spoken Rojas shared with the audience how she felt about the loss of her instrument, dedicating her encore to the hopes that it will be returned. The plaintive melody she chose, one of her favorites to play on her beloved “La Rojita,” was a moving musical equivalent to Rojas’ earlier plea on social media:

“To the person who just stole my guitar in Cleveland: please, return it back to me. To you it is only a guitar; to me it is part of my life. It brings joy, peace and happiness to the world.”

If you have information on the theft of Rojas’ guitar, please call the Cleveland Police at 216-621-1234. A reward of \$1000 is being offered.

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