

**Cleveland Classical Guitar Festival:
Drew Henderson, joined later by
Petra Poláčková (June 2)**

by Jacob Strauss



On Thursday June 2 in Kulas Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Drew Henderson (Canada) opened the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival with a program of Baroque and Romantic music.

This was the first time the festival had been in-person since the pandemic hit the world in March 2020. Henderson was grateful to be playing in front of an audience again, and he performed generously, his musicianship was thoughtful and earnest.

With his eight-string guitar propped up on a support rest, Henderson informed the audience that he would be adding to the program and begin by playing an unmeasured prelude by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, a preeminent composer for the lute, and a contemporary

of J.S. Bach.

(An unmeasured prelude is a progression of notes that have no rhythmic notation, giving the performer improvisational freedom while acclimating themselves to the instrument and testing it in the performance space.)

In J.S. Bach's *Cello Suite No. 4* in E-flat, Henderson manifested a rich tone and color, and his performance was lyrical and focused. It's a meaty piece, and poses interesting challenges for the guitarist to adhere to the way the piece was written for the original instrument. Henderson articulated his expressions with grace, and the dances progressed with verve to the exclamation of the celebratory Gigue.

The Romantic second half displayed the guitarist's range as a musician. Now playing a traditional six-string guitar, his performance of Giulio Regodi's *Nocturne* was shamelessly operatic. The aria moved into a duet, and the chorus of voices was palpable. A dramatic conversation ensued between the two characters, with an orchestration providing a canvas for their dispute. His playing was mesmerizing, inhabiting each mood, and communicating its emotions.

His arrangement and performance of Chopin's *Prelude*, Op. 28 No. 15 was very subtle, very textured, and the sound of raindrops falling on roofs and leaves and pavement, which gives the piece its nickname, was played delicately. The melody over the atmosphere was peaceful and contemplative.



Henderson invited Petra Poláčková onstage for a duet arrangement of Schubert's *Impromptu*, Op. 90 No. 3. Poláčková performed on a Romantic guitar that had an extra scroll attached to its neck, which provided three extra strings for bass notes. She played the melody while Henderson played the running notes. Both of them were engaged in the tenderness of Schubert's hope and melancholy. They let the final notes lovingly dissipate into the hall.

The program ended with a trio of sonatas composed by Niccolò Paganini — which are more sketches than fully-formed sonatas. Even so, they are fun, light compositions that

showed off Henderson's technique, while the simplicity of the musical line allowed his musicality to shine.

With his encore, another unmeasured prelude by Weiss, Henderson brought his recital full circle.

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