

Bokyoung Byun: striking a balance (Oct. 8)

by Stephanie Manning



By the time she was a teenager, Bokyoung Byun had lived in South Korea, China, and the United States — giving her an international perspective, but also complicating her sense of belonging. And as many musicians do, she grappled with her feelings through music. For her visit to the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society on October 8, Byun brought a program designed around her identity, both as a performer and as a person.

As the guitarist told the audience at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights, her move to New York at age 16 — to study at Juilliard — inspired her love of music from the Americas, with its flexibility and diversity of style.

The composers she chose included both those who have lived and worked in their native countries as well as immigrants who made this part of the world their new

home. The theme was even more fitting considering Byun is currently touring North America, part of her prize for winning the 2021 Guitar Foundation of America's International Concert Artist Competition.

The opening *Campanas de Alba* by Eduardo Sainz de la Maza immediately established the core qualities of Byun's playing: a bright, full tone and sleek technical prowess. Her ease at executing the quick, plucked tremolo style created an effect like rippling water. This technique appeared to be one of her favorites, and for good reason. It reappeared occasionally throughout the evening, even bookending the program with the encore, the aptly-named *El Ultimo Tremolo* by Agustín Barrios.

In *Theme, Variations, and Finale* by Manuel Ponce, every note in the flurry of sound was rendered in sharp clarity, and the same was true in Leo Brouwer's *La Gran Sarabanda* — another theme-and-variations work, accented by powerful strummed chords. However, at times her technical focus could feel a bit too singular. In Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Tre Preludi Mediterranei* and Alexander Tansman's *Hommage à*

Chopin, her methodical precision sometimes came at the cost of her musical lines, leaving too little space for the phrases to truly breathe.

After the Tansman, which opened the second half, Byun was much more successful at blending technical ability with emotional nuance. One standout was Celil Refik Kaya's *Prelude and Dance*. Kaya, who performed some of his own work during his performance on this concert series last season, continues to be a composer to watch.

Byun played the last two pieces without pause, creating an energetic Brazilian duology — João Luiz's *Prelude No. 4* and Radames Gnattali's *Brasiliانا No. 13*. She brought a lively spirit to the snappy Latin rhythms, and the open-handed strumming in the Gnattali gave a refreshing sense of freedom.

Throughout, the guitarist chatted to the audience, making sure to pick up the mic before almost every piece. Her remarks were more off-the-cuff than prepared — at one point prompting the audience to jog her memory when she forgot the name Tansman. But her perspective was a welcome addition, especially considering the personal nature of the program, providing a glimpse into the musical world of Bokyoung Byun.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 27, 2022.

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