

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: René Izquierdo reconnects with his roots

by Mike Telin



From the time that Cuban-born guitarist René Izquierdo heard his first live concert as a child, he knew that he wanted to make “connecting with people through music” his life’s work. On Saturday, January 28 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church in Shaker Hts., the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society International Series will present René Izquierdo in a program that highlights his Cuban and Spanish heritage. Tickets are available [online](#).

Speaking by phone from his home in Milwaukee, he began by telling me about his inspiration for his program.

René Izquierdo: I am of Cuban origin but also second generation Spanish. I’ve been living in the United States for 27 years and I’m feeling like I am losing some of my roots. So this program is my attempt to go back and revisit them. The first part is all Cuban music and the second part is all Spanish.

On the Cuban side I have some more modern composers who are guitarists. Then some piano transcriptions from the 19th century — the Nationalistic period. But I did try to pick some lesser known Cuban repertoire.

Mike Telin: I think that Cuban music of all genres is fascinating — there are so many influences.

RI: The main thing that happened in Cuba was the fusion of African and Hispanic music. There are the melodic elements from the Spanish tradition and the rhythmic elements from the African tradition.

And because of the geographic position of Cuba, the transatlantic trips from any part of the Americas to Europe would always stop there. So we have influences that came from Europe into the Americas and then from the Americas to Havana and back to Europe.

The Spanish Tango for example is a variation of the milonga, and the Argentine Tango that came from the habanera rhythm. So it is a big mixture of everything.

MT: Could you please walk me through the first half of the program?

I'm opening with *Guajira a mi Madre* by Antonio Rojas (1921-2008). He was a civil engineer who played music by ear. He belonged to a Cuban tradition called the *filin*. During prohibition in the United States, there was an influx of tourists to the casinos because Americans wanted to gamble and drink. And they also started to bring the big Jazz Bands to play in the casinos, and that's how the big band influence in Cuba started.

There is a famous saying of Dizzy Gillespie "We brought the jazz but came back with the conga." Rojas was part of the musical period that came right after that. The big bands had a massive sound and then it went the opposite way.

Although the music on this program is only instrumental — I don't think you want me to sing — you can see the influence of American Jazz harmonies into traditional Cuban music.

Mirándote by Eduardo Martín (b. 1956) is from the early 2000s. It's a song/son. The second part is a kind of dance music with a lot of syncopation, and the first part is like a ballad. He titled it *Mirándote* (looking at you) because it's a piece that was inspired by seeing his newborn son for the first time. The piece is very tender and beautiful.

Perla Marina by Sindo Garay (1867-1968) is from 1922 or 23. It's got a beautiful melody.

I'll finish this part of the set with *La Comparsa* by Ernesto Lecuona (1895-1963). It's a piano piece arranged for guitar by Manuel Barrueco. Mr. Lecuona was Leo Brouwer's uncle and a very famous Cuban pianist and composer and this is one of his signatures. It depicts the Carnival procession in the streets. It has a syncopated pattern and rhythm and a very beautiful melody. And it's a lovely piece to play.

After that I'll go to the 19th century with *El Velorio* (The Funeral) by Ignacio Cervantes (1847-1905), a piano piece in the Nationalistic style. At that time there was a war for Independence being fought between Cuba and Spain. Cervantes was a son of Spaniards but he was also pro liberation so he wrote many pieces to fuel the Cuban identity and

sound. He was caught with some Cuban liberators, but instead of being sent to prison he was sent back to Spain so that he could fall in love with the motherland.

Another piece I play in this set is he *Adios a Cuba* or Farewell to Cuba. When Cervantes was in Spain he worked with Franz Liszt and many people in France. He also traveled around Europe concertizing and composing.

These two also have French/Haitian influences as do the next two, *El Mensaje* or The Message and *Los Tres Golpes* or the three strikes.

These are quite challenging because they are not idiomatic for the guitar. They sound so easy and unassuming but they are quite a feat to put together.

Then I'll play two pieces by Leo Brouwer, *Un Dia Noviembre* A day in November. He wrote it for the soundtrack of a movie of the same name. I think he wrote *Elogio de la Danza* in 1964 for a commission from the Cuban Dance Company. It's an homage to Russian Ballet. The first part is a homage to Penderecki and the second to Stravinsky. I want to show two different sides of Brouwer: the more modern and the tonal.

I'll close the first half with another piece by Eduardo Martín, *Son del Barrio* (Song of the neighborhood), a block party type of song. It's traditional Cuban concert dance music because there are elements that are not normally suited to dancing.

MT: Did programming this concert achieve what you hoped it would do for your soul?

RI: Yes. But remembering can also be bittersweet. It's funny because when I was studying in Cuba we didn't play a lot of Cuban music, we were being trained in the European tradition — along with some Pizzolla and Villa-Lobos.

MT: Returning to that first concert you heard as a child — was that concert a classical guitar concert?

RI: Yes. I was nine years old and it was by the Greek classical guitarist Costas Cotsiolis. I remember him playing some Bach, but when he played the *Black Decameron* by Leo Brouwer, that did it for me.

I remember that I was kind of bored sitting there listening to a classical guitar but when he played that piece I got goosebumps all over. It was a very powerful experience. When the concert finished, I told my father that I wanted to do to other people what I just felt listening to Costas Cotsiolis.

My father worked for radio and television, and that concert in 1984 at the Havana Festival was recorded. He made me a tape and I listened to the piece every night for over a year before going to sleep.

It took me a while before I could actually play *Black Decameron*, but to this day, I love it.

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