

## David Russell returns to the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society

by Kevin McLaughlin



David Russell may be one of the most respected and distinguished guitarists alive. But despite his Olympian artistic achievements — a Grammy, honorary membership in the Spanish Amigos de la Guitarra, and a place in the Hall of Fame of the Guitar Foundation of America — talking to him is like meeting an old friend over a pint at the pub.

On Saturday, April 22 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, in a program presented by the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, Russell will play works by de la Maza, Marcello, Asencio, Lackenbacher, Susani, and Tolsa, as well as Celtic Folk music. I spoke to the guitarist via Zoom while he was in Chicago and began by asking him about his program.

DR: The first is *Campanas del alba* by Eduardo Sainz de la Maza. It translates as “Bells at Dawn,” and it’s a tremolo study with a lovely low melody. It’s sort of to introduce myself to the audience.

The next is my own transcription of a sonata by Benedetto Marcello that was originally for flute and basso continuo. The music is super pleasant with lovely melodies in the Italian Baroque style. It really sounds like guitar music. The basso continuo with the figured bass gives you the harmony that he wanted. It was very easy to adapt.

I knew Vicente Asencio — he was a wonderful old man who died around 1980. I played quite a few of his pieces for him. He wrote a few pieces for guitar, mostly because he was good friends with Narciso Yepes, a Spanish guitarist, who at one point was very well

known. Yepes adapted some of Ascencio's pieces from the piano, and then Ascencio started writing directly for guitar. This piece, *Suite Valenciana*, is in honor of his homeland, Valencia, on the east coast of Spain.

Nobody knows Bernhard Lackenbacher, but he was from Vienna, and lived at about the same time as Mauro Giuliani. The music is very classical, with a slight Italian air to it. I don't think he entered high society, but he must have been an extraordinary guitarist. There are more of his pieces to be discovered, I'm sure, because this one, *Variations Brillantes*, is just opus 3. There's a sort of virtuosity to it — the variations build in intensity, and there's one slow variation suddenly in the middle, and then it goes all out until the end.

Giacomo Susani is a fantastic guitarist and composer. He's maybe 26 or 27 years old and I've known him for some years. He was studying at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and now he's doing his doctorate in composition.

One day Giacomo played for me and asked if he could play one of his pieces. And so he played this fast, beautiful movement. He gave me the music, and then a year or so later I said, "The problem is, I can't really play it in concert, because it's kind of short." Then this big piece comes to me, and that fast piece he played is now the last movement of a four-movement piece, *The Blue Madeleine*.

Giacomo was inspired by Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where the protagonist eats a madeleine — a kind of cookie, you would call it here — and he remembers a whole lot of his childhood and his past. That taste takes over completely.

As a young man Carlos Garcia Tolsa moved from Spain to South America, and became quite successful. I've chosen two of his pieces out of only fifteen or twenty that were ever published: *Sonata (Al fin solos)* and *Waltzes (Pienso en ti)*. These two are really beautiful. The music is super romantic and quiet virtuosic — he uses the guitar really well.

And the program will conclude with Celtic music. *Bolt the Door* is a kind of gentle jig. *Morag* is an old Scottish and Gaelic melody. *Gurty's Frolic* is an Irish jig. It's what they call a slip jig, so it's in 9/8.

*KM: Could you say more about your arrangements of these Celtic pieces?*

*DR: They're purely old-style Scottish and Irish folk music — I don't like to modernize it. I prefer to keep the music as close to the root or foundation as possible in my own versions.*

*KM: As an Irishman I'm glad to hear that! Speaking of that part of the world, to what extent does being Scottish shape your identity, or your sense of self as a musician?*

DR: I grew up sort of as an immigrant, having rather mixed feelings about where my roots were, but I went to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London and as soon as I opened my mouth they said, "Oh, you're Scottish!" But there were some Scottish musicians there who took me under their wings, especially my friend Dennis [Milne]. He was a composer and double bass player. We started playing concerts together, and half the pieces we played were his arrangements of music from Scotland. So, during that time I started to feel a lot more Scottish, and made more of my own arrangements of Scottish music.

These Celtic ones I'm doing are new. During the pandemic we all had lots of time to do extra stuff. So, I started to arrange some new Scottish pieces. The thing about classical music is that it kind of crosses borders. That is, you can have someone from Bangladesh playing something by Bach.

*KM: I noticed your discography is maybe 75% Spanish music. Is that right?*

DR: Yeah — or Spanish-influenced. Spain has a long connection with the guitar. I have a few CDs of Latin American and European music because of their influence on the guitar as well.

*KM: I've heard you say that every guitarist should learn at least two languages, English and Spanish. Could you expand on that?*

DR: I think whatever piece you're playing, the more you know about why it was written, the more you reach a closer understanding of it. Say I'm going to play a piece by Agustín Barrios, who was from Paraguay. Of course, he wrote in Spanish when he wrote his poems. But also the books that were written about him are in Spanish. If you have that connection to the language when you come to play some of these pieces, I think you have more — I certainly feel I have more — confidence in what I'm doing.

*KM: Do you think that a young guitarist, say an English speaker, can assimilate a Spanish perspective simply by studying the language, or would it take living in the country?*

DR: It would be better to go and live there. The advantage of living in, say, a smaller country in the middle of Europe is that you go a hundred miles in any direction, and you're in another country which has different cultures. I think it makes you more worldly, and makes it easier to understand another person's point of view. A lot of our culture

resides within our language. So, if I'm speaking Spanish and my wife is Spanish, and I live in Spain, it feels different. At the same time, when I'm here in a hotel in the U.S. speaking in English with you, that is also different. So, I think that the more languages you have, the better.

Music itself is a language and the different styles that we play are almost like different languages. So you can become more adept at changing your mentality — you are now thinking in Baroque style, or you're thinking in some other way. Language is one of those abilities that I think develops our versatility.

*KM: I'd like to switch now, just a little bit, to the idea of artistic lineage — who your antecedents were, or who your descendants are?*

DR: I don't really think about it. I've never taught for any length of time at a conservatory as the main professor. I was just at San Francisco Conservatory with David Tanenbaum, and I go to Tucson every year, as well as several other places where I do residencies.

So, I feel that I have had a small influence on many students. Whereas when you are the main teacher, say, like David Tanenbaum, or Jason Vieaux [at CIM], you have an awful lot of influence on fewer people. Those professors definitely have — I don't want to call them disciples — but they have people who will carry their ideas forward, much more than I.

*KM: Out of curiosity, do you prefer to play with fingernails or flesh?*

DR: [shows his nails] It's pretty standard, but it's different for players playing on historic instruments, say, 19th-century guitars, that were not built to be plucked with the nail — at that time there were a variety of ways of plucking. After nylon strings were invented in the 1940s, you could play quite loud with the flesh. The way guitars are built now, the assumption is that the strings will be plucked by fingernails, and you'll get a lot more projection.

There are some people who continue to want to use the flesh and have their pupils do the same. But 99 percent of players playing concerts are using their nails. There was a time when, if you were born with very soft nails — and I had pretty soft nails when I was younger — the nails would wear down. You were always fighting with them, or they would break. Nowadays some people use false nails or acrylic. So, the excuse that “I have bad nails so I'm going to play with the flesh” — that's finished. You can put a false nail on, and if you do it well, it can sound really beautiful. I use one false nail [shows

thumbnail]. It's a piece of ping-pong ball which I slot underneath my own nail. And so now I pluck with that ping-pong ball! It has a consistency very similar to a real nail.

*KM: Do you use amplification when you perform in a large concert hall?*

DR: Quite often. If the hall is really bad or too big, it's better to use amplification. There was a time when amplification was horrible. You hated it because the tone was so bad. But now there are really good microphones and speakers. Recently I did a tour in Korea, and amplification was used in every hall except one. And the one that didn't have it didn't need it. The hall was beautiful with wonderful acoustics — you could say the acoustics are a form of amplification. Whereas, if the concert is in some huge hall that's actually made for giving lectures and is totally dry, the guitar just sounds tinny. It sounds really unpleasant. So amplification makes it sound better, not only in volume, but the feeling of being in a warm hall with nice resonance.

*KM: Well, David Russell, thank you so much for this. I'm looking forward to the concert.*

DR: Great. Thank you.

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