

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: David Russell (Apr. 22)

by Kevin McLaughlin



For the grand finale to this season's International Series, the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society welcomed David Russell in a much-anticipated appearance at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights. With easygoing charm and astonishing skill, Russell delighted and flabbergasted the capacity crowd on Saturday night, April 22 in a program of familiar and unfamiliar works.

In his opening remarks, Guitar Society executive director Erik Mann announced that this would be the last CCGS concert to take place at Plymouth Church, with the series moving to the Maltz Performing Arts Center next season. The intimacy of Plymouth will be missed, but the recently refurbished Maltz will give the series an upgrade in prestige.

La'Nia Echols was the excellent student guitarist on Saturday. She showed poise and a good command of the instrument, and made a beautiful tone.

In an artful display of technique serving expression, Russell began with Eduardo Sainz de la Maza's *Campanas del alba* ("Bells at Dawn"). His guitar-cum-mandolin purred with Mediterranean melody. Maybe a slow-motion camera could help explain what Russell's fingers were up to, but surely this was one of the most beautiful and smoothest examples of guitar tremolo an audience could hope to hear.

Benedetto Marcello would surely have approved of Russell's transcription and performance of one of the composer's flute sonatas. One of the delights of David Russell's recitals is the variety of articulation, finger weight, and tone color he's able to employ to meet a piece on its own terms, and here he proved a convincing emissary for Baroque style, even summoning lute- and harpsichord-like qualities from his guitar where it suited the music.

Russell is known for his interpretations of Spanish repertoire, having lived in Spain since the time he was six. 20th-century composer Vicente Asencio devoted much of his creative energies to exploring the music of his home region of Valencia, including the popular 1971 *Suite Valenciana*. After delivering a lively and atmospheric prelude, Russell took his time with the reflective cançoneta, changing his color slightly. The final dance had the music back on its feet with a jazzy 6/8 lilt. Some tricky shifts in the left hand were fun to notice for their ballet-like precision.

Bernhard Lackenbacher, the 19th-century Viennese composer of *Variations Brillantes*, was unknown to most of the audience and is relatively new to Russell himself. An Italian friend only recently sent him this salon showpiece, a theme and variations set designated as opus 3. Russell's performance caused more than one audience member to involuntarily open their jaws — a few times. Each variation seemed to be more dazzling than the last. The penultimate variation, an aria for guitar à la Donizetti, was an unexpected moment of heart-on-sleeve before a final burst of fireworks.

Giacomo Susani is a young Italian guitarist and composer whom Russell encountered at the Royal Academy of Music. Susani dedicated *The Blue Madeleine* to Russell, after Russell heard — and liked — a performance of what is now the last movement during a lesson. “Familiar Dreams” is the madeleine story from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Two slow Arioso movements follow, with the original “Cypresses” movement closing the work in an exciting tour de force.

Carlos Garcia Tolsa, a Spanish-born composer who settled in Argentina, was active during the second half of the 19th century. He produced many guitar works during his lifetime, of which the two chosen by Russell, lyrical and romantic with intriguing titles, are typical. In *Sonata (Al fin solos)* — “At last, alone [together]” — one imagines the guitarist with willing company, recently reunited. *Waltzes (Pienso en ti)* — “I think of you” — is sentimental too, but agreeably so.

Describing himself as having grown up in Spain, but “obviously a Scotsman” (“Do I look Spanish?” he asked wryly), Russell concluded the program with his own delightful arrangements of three Celtic folk tunes — two from Scotland and one from Ireland. Hewing as closely as possible to the originals (“I don't like to modernize them,” he said),

Russell's arrangements also managed to sound idiomatic for the guitar. The middle folk song, *Morag*, slow and mournful, was especially affecting. I heard weeping (truly) from audience members around me during its beautiful playing. The last, a "slip jig" in 9/8 time, made for a fitting close — as charming and virtuosic as the player himself.

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