

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Stephanie Jones (Sept. 17)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Australian guitarist Stephanie Jones brought passion and clarity to the opening concert of the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's 2023-24 International Series, in a program of mostly German and South American works at the Maltz Performing Arts Center on September 17. This was the first concert since CCGS moved from their cozier confines of Plymouth UCC. Whatever the acoustical challenges in the Maltz, the charisma of Jones' playing made a clear and lasting impression.

Beginning with two movements from J.S. Bach's *Violin Partita No. 3*, she employed precision and a rubato musical line, breathing life into the familiar Gavotte en Rondeau movement. The ebb and flow of tempos and the range of color created the sense of making up the music on the spot. Her unobtrusive use of a foot-operated tablet to read the score helped this impression. The Gigue, played at high speed, was a digital festival of fingers dancing up and down the fretboard.

Her appreciation for fellow Australian Richard Charlton's evocative *Black Cockatoo Flying Alone* came through in her introductory remarks. Images of the titular bird had been saved on her tablet and held up for everyone to see — too small and distant, unfortunately, but it was a charming gesture (like seeing someone's vacation photos). The cockatoo mates for life, she said, but what to make of a bird alone? Charlton's work is part tribute to the landscape of Australia and part elegy. The middle love song was especially well paced by Jones, who indulged in tender slides and throbbing vibrato.

Ross Edwards' *Blackwattle Caprices*, another portrait of Australian ecology, is named for a body of water near Sydney, and for the Blackwattle tree dotting its shores. The first caprice, perhaps a canto d'amore, is sublime and sweet. Jones' vibrato seemed to animate

some angelic spirit from within her instrument. The second caprice elicited grittier strokes from the performer, and wiggles from audience members.

Written for Jones by the Bavarian-born Jakob Schmidt, *Progression I* (subtitled “There is no morning, just light”) was played with a special, joyful energy. The driving ostinato swelled, crested, and faded, with dancing, more than singing, its primary purpose. Jones added a sly postscript after the applause: she and Schmidt were married just two weeks ago.

A favorite of the performer’s ended the first half. *Cielo Abierto* (“Open Sky”) by Argentinian composer Quique Sinesi is also the title of Jones’ most recent album. In a brilliant display of rhythm, style, and technique, she maximized the sound potential of her instrument using every part of her hands — the flesh of her thumb and fingers on strings, conventional nail technique, knuckles for drumming, and open hand for slapping the strings and the body. Things got especially exuberant toward the end with violent string slaps on the neck before more percussive hits all over the guitar — ouch! I mean, olé!

Calm and melancholy, Rostislav Golubov’s poignant *Fantasy on the theme of a Ukrainian folk song* (“Oh, in the cherry orchard”) was written in 2021 as a balm against the grief and pain of war. Jones came across the piece and contacted the composer for a copy. None was available since it was still on a computer in Kharkiv. Fortunately for Jones and for us, the composer was able to write it out again from memory.

Jones’ technical polish and interpretive prowess were turned up high for the biggest work on the program, Astor Piazzolla’s *Estaciones Porteñas* (“The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires”), arranged for solo guitar by Sérgio Assad. Her performance warmed up as the seasons did, with a particularly passionate account of “Verano Porteño (Summer).” Impressive again was her mastery of articulation and color, which she was able to vary at will according to musical requirements. Perhaps exhausted after this technical workout, Jones let out a little whoop after the last flourish in Autumn.

Antônio Carlos Jobim’s *A Felicidade* (“Celebration”) from the film *Black Orpheus* (1958) concluded the program with extra zest, Jones unaided by a score.

A pretty encore followed, the Irish traditional melody *A Vision of Angels* — also known as *Be Thou My Vision* and *Slane*. Arranged by Richard Charlton, it sent audience members home humming the familiar tune, their spirits imprinted by the beauty of the guitar.

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