

Jazz Meets Classical: Grammy-nominated Dan Wilson on the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society Showcase

by Zach Terrillion



Classical guitar is a tradition dating back centuries. Such a long tradition is up for fresh twists and interpretations. That's the case with this year's Showcase Concert from the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, which returns on Saturday, November 11 with the appearance of jazz guitarist Dan Wilson.

An Akron native, Wilson will be the first jazz musician to play at the showcase. I sat down with Wilson over Zoom to discuss his style, the surprising similarities and differences between classical and jazz guitar, George R.R. Martin, and what audiences should look forward to at Saturday's show.

When it comes to style, Wilson considers himself a "musical omnivore," tracing it to many different sources. His musical prowess emerged in the church with a love of gospel music. He has since taken inspiration from other genres like R&B, hip-hop, blues, and traditional jazz. He has performed with jazz greats like Joey DeFrancesco and his trio quartet, performing on his Grammy-nominated album *Project Freedom*, as well as with other luminaries like Van Morrison. A true omnivore, Wilson's palate has been all-encompassing. "Whatever inspires me, I take it in."

Wilson's inspirations include the classical guitar, particularly the work of Andrés Segovia. "He's always been a hero of mine on the instrument." He admires how classical players like Segovia can get their music off the paper. "When you see a great guitarist like Segovia play, you never see a page in front of him — he's internalized the music."

While both the classical and jazz guitar traditions involve energetic performance, Wilson finds some differences between the two practices. The biggest is the conversation around improvisation, which jazz musicians live by. “We pay attention to harmony, form, and a different technique with the pick. It [jazz] is as involved as the classical guitar, even if it doesn’t have as long a history.” Still, amid their differences, they share an ultimate goal. “It’s to make music.”

Going beyond influences, we asked Wilson how he first got involved with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society. He had met CCGS’ executive director Erik Mann at the height of the pandemic, as he joined a Guitar Society collaboration with Mexican musician Anastasia Sonaranda in a cover of the national standard *El Cascabel*. The classical and jazz backgrounds merged well, and Mann would later contact Wilson, asking to be part of the showcase. “I guess he liked what I had to offer, and I was glad to do it.”

What does Wilson have to offer for the Showcase Concert? When asked about his setlist, the guitarist indicated he only had a couple of tracks set in stone. Citing one of his favorite artists, author George R.R. Martin, Wilson said he considers himself “more a gardener than an architect.” He approaches his concerts with a little bit of structure, like seeds planted in a garden. However, he leaves room for growth, adding plenty of improv to these performances.

The November 11th setlist includes an interpretation of *Dienda*, a waltz by pianist Kenny Kirkland. “It’s one of my favorite tunes in terms of how the harmony complements the melody.” And it throws in some tough chord changes, which for Wilson marks a great composer. The guitarist will also be playing some original compositions from his 2017 live album, *Balancing Act*, as well as pulls from the Great American Songbook and standard jazz repertoire.

He will be planting that musical garden with Detroit bassist Brandon Rose, whose talent developed under church player Henry Roberson. He has since played with Marcus Miller, Jeff Berlin, and Rodney Whitaker. Wilson is excited for the close interaction the duo setting will provide. “I know Brandon is able to have some surprises thrown at him, and he may throw some at me. We’ll agree on some tunes but might change it up right until the concert.”

Also performing this Saturday will be the Gruca White Ensemble. Guitarist Robert Gruca and flutist Linda White will perform a medley of Brazilian music, reflecting CCGS’ international emphasis. The Ensemble will be joined in duos and trios by Brazilian singer Luca Mundaca, who takes influence from jazz and bossa nova to produce music reflecting on nature and our relationships with it. When paired with the spontaneous

practice of Wilson, the concert is sure to be dynamic, going beyond what one typically expects of “classical” guitar.

When concluding our interview, Wilson had a final pitch for the showcase, considering it an ode to the power of live performance. “There’s something about the human connection you get from live performers that can’t be replicated anywhere else. It’s the type of energy that can’t be matched by a digital platform.” He looks forward to gauging the energy from his audience and sharing the music he loves. “This is what we live for. To make people’s days and lives better. I hope we can do that on the 11th.”

The Cleveland Classical Guitar Society’s Showcase Concert will be held on Saturday, November 11, at 7:30 pm at the Maltz Performing Arts Center. Free tickets can be reserved [here](#). You can book a seat for in-person attendance or check out the concert via livestream. Again, all tickets will be free!

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