

## Zidur Guitar Duo to make Cleveland debut for Classical Guitar Society

by Mike Telin



The relationship between Hermelindo Ruiz (left) and the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society dates back to 2020, when the guitarist/composer became an Artist in Residence for CCGS through a Creative Fusion grant from the Cleveland Foundation. A year later, Ruiz became a CCGS Composer in Residence, writing

works for young guitar players that were premiered by the students.

This week Ruiz makes his third visit to Cleveland — this time joined by Samuel Diz in the Zidur Guitar Duo. On Saturday, February 24 at 7:30 pm, the duo will make its Cleveland debut at the Maltz Performing Arts Center. The program features music from their homelands of Puerto Rico and Spain. Tickets are available [online](#).

Ruiz was in Chicago when I caught up with him by phone and began by asking how he and Diz came to form the duo.

Hermelindo Ruiz: Through friends of mine, Samuel discovered some scores of my work and started to play my music in Europe. I am from Puerto Rico and he's from Spain, and he started telling people about this Puerto Rican classical music composer. And that opened a lot of doors to me, including getting to go to Spain. We started playing as a duo in 2009 when we were 20 or 21 years old at the time.

*Mike Telin: Amazing. Please tell me about your interesting program.*

HR: One of the things we always do in our concerts is include some of the hidden repertoire from classical music, and new compositions that I write for the duo. For example the last piece, *Concerto to San Telmo*, I wrote for two guitars and ensemble. We will have a string quartet (Ariel Karas and Victor Beyens, violins, Brian Slawta, viola, and Trevor Kazarian, cello) and percussion (Dylan Moffitt).

We're also playing Maria Rodrigo's *Coplas de España*. She was exiled to Puerto Rico during the Spanish Civil War, and she was a very important composer — when you look at the history of classical music in Madrid in the early 20th century, you can see that she was a leading figure.

We have a piece by the wonderful American composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk called *Souvenir de Porto Rico*. I always wanted to play it because it's a piece he wrote when he was young and was traveling all across America, Central America, and the Caribbean. It's a set of variations over one of the most famous Puerto Rican folk songs. Even today if you go there and sing the melody — *Si me dan pasteles, les dénmelos calientes*, “If you give me cakes, give them to me hot” — everybody will know it. But I think Gottschalk did an incredible job in recreating it as a classical work of art.

I'm very excited that this concert has a mix of Puerto Rican, Spanish, and American music. For me it's very important to include the American tradition.

*MT: It's great that you're starting with Leonardo Egúrbida's Los Dos Amigos. For some reason it just makes sense.*

HR: Right now we are in Chicago and yesterday we played in some elementary schools for Ravinia. We played that piece and the kids asked what it was — we said that it's a piece for two friends.

*MT: You also have a piece called Zidur, the name of your duo.*

HR: I wrote it for the first time that Samuel and I were playing in Spain. I was doing my master's degree at Yale and I had a lot of ideas in my head. It's like a fight for the two of us — *Los Dos Amigos* is friendly but *Zidur* is like a fight between two guitars.

*MT: You're also playing José Fernández Vide's Violetas and Juan Acosta's Three Puerto Rican Dances.*

HR: Both of those are more 19th-century sounding — beautiful and romantic. And I think they make the program very accessible to all audiences — there's a little bit for every taste.

*MT: Congratulations on the video recordings you made with players from The Cleveland Orchestra as part of the Creative Fusion Project, which happened during COVID.*

HR: Yes. And what I remember from that experience is that I had all these emotions going on at the same time. I was so excited to work with The Cleveland Orchestra, the producers, and to present the music of my home country. But at the same time there were a lot of things that were difficult. I remember that I had to take three COVID tests before showing up to the hall. I was so nervous because they told me that if I tested positive I was not going to be able to record, and of course I didn't want that.

The thing that was funny about that experience is that I never practiced the guitar with a mask on my face. The hall was so beautiful and I couldn't believe the sound — the guitar sounded so incredible. But playing with a mask on my face was limiting my oxygen. So it was a mixture of everything together. [*Click [here](#) to watch the videos.*]

*MT: You were also an artist in residence for CCGS, and wrote a number of pieces for young people.*

HR: Yes, I wrote a whole set of pieces for kids. We were trying to see how we could make classical music interesting for kids who don't necessarily have a taste for classical music. I actually wrote 24 little pieces for total beginners. I'm very excited because on Friday I'm going to watch the kids playing my pieces.

We did some videos and played a concert together with me, the teachers, and the students. And I would say that diversity is something that is both included in my concert, and was a huge subject of my residency in Cleveland — how can we integrate everybody? There were a lot of Latino kids, but there were also a lot of other ethnicities.

*MT: You enjoyed working with them?*

HR: Yes, every project was very beautiful.

*MT: What did you find difficult about writing for beginners?*

HR: I'm going to tell you a story that I think will explain everything. When they asked me to write small pieces for the kids, I was so excited. I was like, wow, this is my opportunity to write something very simple. So I went to my room and spent a couple of days writing I think four pieces. The next morning I sent them to the director, Erik Mann, and he said, well, you know, the pieces are beautiful, but they are too difficult for the students.

I said, okay, and wrote four new pieces. I was very proud of my work and I sent them to Erik. The next morning I received another message from him saying, I think you're doing

a wonderful job, but we cannot use any of these pieces because they're similar to *Happy Birthday* or *Twinkle Twinkle*.

At that moment I realized that I had to rethink everything I know about the guitar. And that day was when I wrote the best pieces from the set because I started from zero. For example, I wrote the first piece to be played only with one finger on the left hand. And it's a piece I love to play now, because it reminds me of when I already wrote eight pieces at that moment, but none of them really worked as pedagogical pieces. But then this one, with one finger, a student can learn it in ten minutes, and it actually sounds really cool. *[Click here to watch the [video](#).]*

*MT: Is there anything else you would like to tell me?*

HR: The last piece is going to be a treat. *Concerto to San Telmo* has a little bit of a cinematic taste, but it also has very strong and even abstract sonorities. I think it's going to be the highlight of the night.

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