

## Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: Nicolò Spera plays on ten strings (June 7)

by Daniel Hathaway



Filling a void in the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival when a scheduled artist developed visa complications, University of Colorado Boulder professor Nicolò Spera stepped in with his 10-string guitar and a stimulating program that was technically and mentally challenging — both for the guitarist and his Mixon Hall audience — on Friday, June 7.

The extra strings on that instrument added range and resonance to Spera's program, which began and ended with famous works from the passacaglia family, with a contemporary piece at its center.

At the end of his “Mystery” Sonatas — fifteen little suites for violin and continuo based on the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries of Christ represented by the beads on the Rosary — Heinrich Ignatz Franz Biber added a postlude in the form of a passacaglia for solo violin based on a four-bar descending bass figure.

Played alone before the variations, the bass line immediately demonstrated the resonance of Spera's instrument, and his smooth playing of Biber's fast divisions never lost track of the ostinato or the fundamentally intimate character of the piece.

The young Italian composer Giacomo Susani dedicated his *Suite per La Cappella Degli Scrovegni* to Spera. The work springs from several streams of inspiration: the Giotto frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, a motet by Marchetto da Padova which may have been written for the dedication of the Chapel in 1305, and the theological foundations on which the Chapel was built. Susani composed one

movement for each of the seven vices and virtues illustrated in the frescoes, with an eighth conjoined that “according to the conception of the world in 14th-century Italy, marks the end of temporality.”

The programmatic suite begins with thick chords in free style, moving on to second-movement modal sequences with a valedictory strum at the end. The third (Annunciation) is characterized by single chords and slow melodic material, the fourth (the Slaughter of the Innocents) by cries of pain and anguish expressed in fast technical passages. The fifth represents the ritual of foot washing, and the sixth, Pentecost, is mysterious with single-line passages and interesting chords. The seventh suggests the march to the Last Judgment with a craggy ostinato. And the “Eighth Day” concludes the suite in single, pointillistic soft notes.

Spera played the Suite from memory, announcing each evocative movement by title before performing them with insight and commitment.

Bach’s *Chaconne* from the second suite for solo violin may be one of the most-arranged pieces in the repertoire. Reimagining it for a plucked instrument creates quite a different piece, although in his transcription, as Spera writes in his program notes, “Believing that the Ciaccona’s majestic force lies in its sobriety and elegance, and the magic of Bach’s writing for solo violin is foremost in its art of suggestion, I have taken pains to change as little as possible.”

Spera’s playing was indeed sober and elegant, his melodic direction and articulations clear — qualities that were also abundantly present in every piece on this recital. Every bit as understated was his encore, “Angelico,” the opening movement from Book 1 of *Música Callada* (“Silent Music”) by Catalan composer Federico Mompou.

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