

Petra Poláčková dazzles at CIGF with a journey into Czech Music (June 9)

by Max Newman



You will not hear many classical guitarists with a better feel for emotion, atmosphere, pace, and tone than Petra Poláčková. The talented Czech musician showcased all of these talents and more for the audience at the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall on Sunday afternoon June 9.

The performance, the penultimate event of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival, spanned four exhilarating Czech works. On this particular afternoon, golden sunbeams streaked in through Mixon's floor-to-ceiling windows, drenching the stage with a light that underscored the otherworldly quality of Poláčková's playing. One would be hard-pressed to find a more musically exhilarating way of closing out this magnificent series.

The performer's uncanny ability to swing seamlessly from mood to mood was instantly noticeable. Arpeggios beamed out glowingly at the audience as they wound into somber, brow-furrowing chords. Melodies that bounced around the walls of the concert hall at a frantic pace slowed down to a stroll without a hitch. Her playing felt as though Poláčková had the ability to control time itself, allowing the listener to sink into the music and live in it.

Technically, Poláčková was flawless. At times, she played with such speed that the sounds being produced could barely be comprehended in real time. Even then, Poláčková didn't miss a single note. She drew a lush, rich tone out of both instruments she used (a nine-string romantic guitar for the first half and a six-string guitar for the second).

Poláčková's commitment to playing music exclusively of Czech origin allowed her to shine a light on composers that may have been previously unknown to the audience. For

instance, before the performance, most would not have been familiar with Ludvik Dietrich, a mostly forgotten Czech guitarist, composer, and music teacher who passed away in 1858.

Poláčková did justice to every composition that she performed. She played Štěpán Rak's contemplative *Variations on a theme by Jaromír Klempir*, with accuracy, highlighting the brooding melancholy of the piece. Václav Tomáš Matejka's always-moving *Sonate VI, op. 31* pulled unendingly on the heartstrings of the listener. Michal Hromek's intriguing *St. Wenceslas Suite*, written for Poláčková, was craftily inspired by the 12th century *St. Wenceslas Chorale*, one of the oldest known Czech melodies.

With its emotional poignancy, Ludvik Dietrich's *Salonstücke für die Gitarre* (Salon Music for the Guitar), emphasized by exceptional playing from Poláčková, was particularly outstanding. The first of its four movements with its colorful and delicate chord progressions and shimmering, summery feel, was the perfect soundtrack to the golden sunshine bathing the stage. The second was just as powerful, but with moonlit chords that felt as though they were playing for the sun as it sank from the sky. The third, by far the shortest, was frolicking and whimsical, in stark contrast to the fourth, with its ominous, haunting melodies that placed an eerie exclamation point upon the piece.

Petr Eben's *Tabulatura Nova* (1979) was the most beautiful piece on the program — an endlessly complex, seven-movement work that was harsh and sharp-edged, yet gorgeous in a harrowing, mysterious way. Many of its chords sounded impossible, as if there were no way for their dissonance to resolve. Yet, both Eben and Poláčková found a way every time.

Poláčková not only maintained the energy of Eben's work, she built upon it. When it seemed it could expand no more, she concluded with a shower of guitar harmonics that were deafening in their subtlety. Impassioned and encompassing, Petra Poláčková's performance was musically incandescent from start to finish.

Responding to the audience's warm applause, Poláčková offered an encore, a beautiful Schubert song arranged by Johann Kaspar Mertz — a perfect endnote for the concert on both a musical and spiritual level.

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