

Jorge Caballero tries something new for the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society

by Stephanie Manning



Playing an entire symphony on classical guitar? It's more possible than you'd think. And it's become second nature for Jorge Caballero, known for performing transcriptions of works like Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

But Caballero's upcoming program with Cleveland Classical Guitar Society is something a bit different. "For me, it's somewhat of a departure from what I've been doing recently," he said in a recent interview. True, his setlist at the Maltz Performing Arts

Center includes Antonín Dvořák's entire *Symphony No. 9* ("From the New World"). But not just because it's a technical achievement — it's also part of a broader thematic connection between Black spirituals and Western classical music.

The concert on Saturday, October 26 begins at 7:30 pm, and tickets are available [online](#). And a free prelude event, "Strings of the Spirit," takes place at Karamu House on Thursday, October 24 at 7:00 pm. Learn more [here](#).

Caballero has been playing the Dvořák, transcribed by the Japanese guitarist Kazuhito Yamashita, since the early 2000s. But he was unfamiliar with the two other works on the program before they were suggested by the Guitar Society.

This first is *Guitarra* by Ulysses Kay, a piece from 1973 that Caballero said is virtually unknown among guitarists. "I don't know anyone who's ever made reference to it in the past," he said. "It was completely new to me."

Once he started practicing, he was pleasantly surprised: "I thought, it's very well-conceived, and it's a shame that it's not known better." Kay casts some originally

upbeat spirituals in a more subdued light, which Caballero said intrigued him. “All of these details that correlate with a heritage from the past, played on an instrument that composers are usually afraid to write for — it’s really remarkable.”

Kay studied piano, violin, and saxophone, but he wasn’t a guitarist, which Caballero said makes the recitative style of *Guitarra* all the more impressive. “It’s a very interesting and very clever decision from a composer who probably didn’t have a lot of guidance from guitarists on how to write.”

By contrast, the final work on the program is written by a guitarist, for a guitarist — the premiere of Thomas Flippin’s *Poor Mourner’s Got a Home at Last*. The two compositions differ in both style and time period, but Flippin’s work also transforms spirituals to fit a distinct compositional style.

Caballero said Flippin’s perspective is more contemporary, bringing out interesting textural and harmonic details. “The way he treats musical ideas speaks of something from a really deeply spiritual perspective,” he said. “That’s my intuitive response. I’m curious to see what he [Flippin] says about that, but I’ll find out.”

The guitarist added that he’s been enjoying exploring the work for the first time. “The way I imagine it is a young man going to church for the first time and hearing spirituals, and how he would react emotionally to them and their sound.”

For Antonín Dvořák, the Czech composer who came to the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century, his first time hearing spirituals proved to be highly influential. The “Largo” theme from the second movement of his *Symphony No. 9* was even set to lyrics by one of his students, becoming the song “Goin’ Home.”

Obviously, the symphony’s guitar transcription is incredibly difficult from a technical perspective, but Caballero views Yamashita’s transcriptions as more of a theoretical endeavor. “They basically pose an interesting question for a guitarist: what is the guitar capable of doing, and what is the guitar ultimately, as an instrument?” he said.

That challenge requires the player to go back to their fundamental skills. Those foundations “aren’t there simply because you’re supposed to follow them, but they are ostensibly aimed at making the instrument sound at its best,” he said. “And if you’re trying to be an artist and to communicate through an instrument, that’s what you are always looking for.”

He noted that his performance of the symphony has become “more refined, more efficient, and hopefully more impactful” over the ten years he’s been playing it regularly.

“You have to sort through the problems, never forgetting *why* you’re sorting through the problems,” he said. “It’s important to keep all those things in perspective.”

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