

João Luiz embraces a fresh perspective for his Cleveland solo outing

by Stephanie Manning



There's a lot that's new about the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's next concert, starting with the date. Instead of the usual Saturday, it's a Friday — November 8, to be exact, at 7:30 pm. And although local audiences have only seen João Luiz as one half of the Brasil Guitar Duo, this time he'll be taking the stage solo.

That's just the beginning of the new things that await in the program "Brazil Meets Cuba." The guitarist's performance at the Maltz Performing Arts Center is chock full of premieres, all written for Luiz by composers Leo Brouwer, Sergio Assad, and Ronaldo Miranda.

"Those are such important composers for guitar," Luiz said in a recent interview. "And I'm happy that I'll be able to do that in Cleveland because I like this place, the Guitar Society, and its people so much. It's going to be very special."

The "Brazil" part of the program begins with two pieces by Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Mazurka-Chôro* and *Chôros No. 1*, "Típico." Aside from these two, the rest of the program was commissioned for or written by Luiz himself. The resulting collection of music brings together years of work, given that planning for his solo performances started back in 2019.

"When it was time for me to put together some repertoire, I thought of some of my favorite composers and people," the guitarist said. That included fellow Brazilian Ronaldo Miranda, whose piece *Appassionata* is famous in guitar repertoire. "It's very challenging. And I've always loved that piece."

Luiz said that *Variações 2020*, Miranda's new work, highlights the composer's neo-tonal style. "He has this great feeling for really beautiful harmonies, and how he develops his ideas — he's really a master."

The commissioning project also gave him the confidence to approach one of his musical heroes, Sergio Assad. “Sergio was so, so enthusiastic — you can’t imagine,” he said. At the height of the pandemic, what was originally twelve studies quickly became 24.

“I was really blown away by the quality of the work he wrote in such a short amount of time,” Luiz said. He’s since learned that Assad “was so, so into writing the pieces that he barely slept or ate for a week, because he was working nonstop.”

For this concert, Luiz will perform five of those 24 studies — ones that he’s recorded but never performed in a concert setting. “Because this concert in Cleveland is so special, I wanted to use the ones that I never played,” he said. Having so many premieres on one program “on one hand is very challenging, because it’s a huge risk. But also I feel very excited about it.”

For the “Cuba” side of the program, the guitarist is featuring works by Leo Brouwer. The Cuban composer was the first one Luiz reached out to back in 2019, and he responded with a piece called *Los guardianes de la magia*. Luiz later asked him if he could write something using Cuban folk music, which became *Sonata Cubana No. 7*.

Luiz has visited Cuba before, for a 2014 trip that he calls one of the highlights of his career. Cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Carlos Prieto had commissioned Brouwer to write a piece for his 75th anniversary, and they asked Luiz and his duo partner Douglas Lora to perform the guitar parts. “It was special in so many ways,” he said. “A lot of amazing things came together on that trip.”

Although the guitarist has released a recording of *Sonata Cubana* as a three-movement set, composer and performer recently worked together to add a fourth — making the Cleveland performance the first time all the movements will be performed live.

The evolving nature is typical, Luiz said, when having pieces written for him. “There’s this really incredible component of discovery, because you’re really starting from scratch. There’s no reference — you become the reference even for yourself.”

The Cleveland program will be rounded out by four of Luiz’s own works: *Sereno*, *Prelúdio No. 2*, *MadrigAfro III*, and *Embolada*. “I’ve written a lot, but I don’t know my music as a player,” he said. When he composes, he doesn’t use his instrument, which means he had to really learn what he wrote. His decision to start playing more of his own work comes from an idea that’s been on his mind: “In order to promote your music, it needs to start with you.”

Although Luiz plays plenty of concerts, he said it never occurred to him that playing his own work “was really important in order for my music to get out and for other people to get to know my work. It should start with me, but it’s never too late. I’m doing it now.”

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