

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: Recitals by Alan Mearns, Laura Snowden & Petra Polácková

By Daniel Hathaway



Northern Ireland-born guitarist **Alan Mearns**, now based in North Carolina, gave the first of three very different recitals I heard at the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival. He performed on Saturday afternoon, June 7 in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Following the plan he described in an interview, his solo recital largely featured transcriptions and arrangements of works not originally intended for the guitar, a topic he addressed in a lecture conversation with Jonathan Leathwood the day before.

The gist of that session, Mearns said, was that arrangers are really re-composing pieces that should sound as native as possible on new instruments, but need not slavishly include every note of the original.

Performing on a guitar by Zebulon Turrentine, everything Mearns played sounded effortless, beginning with lutenist Silvius Leopold Weiss' *Prelude & Passacaglia*, reworked for guitar by the performer and his mentor Stanley Yeats. Nicely paced and with subtle ornamentation, Mearns' playing was as lucid and soft-spoken as his verbal notes.

Two of Frédéric Chopin's *Twenty-four Preludes* demonstrated Mearns' sure hand as an arranger as well as his sensitivity as an interpreter. No. 6 featured a beautiful shaping of the melodic line and perfectly-matched repeated notes, while No. 15 hovered between the elegant and exquisite in his building and decaying of dynamics.

Mearns wrote in his program notes that Stanley Yeats' self-described "paraphrase" of Isaac Albéniz's *La Vega* preserves a forgotten masterpiece "full of counterpoint, chromaticism, and extended impressionistic harmonies," in the arranger's words, "a

reduction and re-composition of Albeniz's original work that makes no attempt to reserve its broad, formal structure.”

The guitarist brought out its long, delicate lines that led to a middle section featuring a beautiful transition back to the beginning. The piece ended strikingly with high notes on the neck of the guitar.

The first half of the program ended with Mearns' original, two-movement work *Oración* (“*Prayer*”). “*Cantos*” is reminiscent of timeless, ancient chants, “*Perpetuo*,” as the title implies, uses incessant rhythmic activity to represent spiritual searching. The guitarist put both concepts across vividly, demonstrating an amazing command of rhythm in the second.

Three pieces by Manuel De Falla followed the break. Mearns' arrangement and performance of “*Serenata*” brought a swagger to the program amid lovely phrasing and a rainbow of colors, while “*Serenada Andaluza*” added a momentary touch of Flamenco to an exquisitely-voiced piece where every musical line had direction. Mearns brought his own expressive voice into the lullaby “*Nana*.”

Then Mearns tucked in a tribute to his homeland, specifically to the rugged landscape of the Inishoowan Peninsula, a beautiful landscape that he said cries out for a musical setting.

The guitarist closed his program by returning to the musical form we heard at the beginning, the *Passacaglia*, this time called *Chaconne* and excerpted from J.S. Bach's Second Violin Partita. Bach's is monumental, with 33 variations that may have a mystical, numerological meaning. It's a massive undertaking on the guitar, but for a player who can see his way clearly through its thorny technical patches and whose elegant sound can make it seem as though Bach intended it for the instrument, it can be a rich and meaningful experience. As it was in Alan Mearns' hands on Saturday.

The encore — Albéniz's *Mallorca*.

On Sunday, June 8 at 1 pm, British guitarist, vocalist, and composer **Laura Snowden** gave a lovely, informal, cabaret-style recital in Mixon Hall beginning with her own arrangement of the traditional *Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair*.

That would have nicely set up a whole set of folksong settings, but Snowden made a segue straight into her arrangement of one of François Couperin's 240 keyboard pieces, *Les Barricades Mystérieuses* — not the last pairing on the program that might have left you scratching your head.

But it worked, thanks to Snowden's nuanced phrasing and sense of harmonic progression, which turned a piece that can sound mechanical into a lyrical marvel. Did she even add a phrase or two of her own?

Snowden told the audience that after spending so much time writing her own music, she had the urge to return to J.S. Bach, and one of the results on view was her arrangement of the Adagio & Fugue from his *Violin Sonata No. 1* in g. She took her time with the intimate phrasing of the Adagio, letting it unfurl at its own speed, and the Fugue flowed beautifully from one voice to the next.

An atmospheric, meditative piece, her own *This Changing Sky* captures the vicissitudes of the heavens early in the morning ("a time of day I'm not at all familiar with," she said). Slow chords change into tremolos underpinning her own humming and pizzicatos. "The clouds are moving. You can see the sky in your head."

Her *Song for Maria* — her sister, who is six years younger — is an engagingly short piece with a simple melody over arpeggiated chords.

Snowden then turned to Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Five Preludes*, from which played Nos. 1, 3, and 2. In the first, she made easy work of the accompanying filigree. She brought an abundance of colors to the attractive musical lines of the third, and pointed up the folkiness of the louder, darker middle section of the second.

Snowden's *As she sleeps* explores the different layers of slumber. A nightmarish opening makes a long, slow transition into a Venezuelan waltz, then returns to the nightmare before suddenly waking up.

A beautifully paced arrangement of Frédéric Chopin's *Nocturne, Op. 9 No. 2* featured soft, delicate scale passages.

Snowden's own *The Trap* deals with the feeling of gradually being enticed into something and realizing it too late. "One day you wake up in a place you don't know, with hands you don't recognize."

Snowden's arrangements of the traditional tunes *Carrickfergus* and *The Parting Glass* were fun pieces, expertly played. Performed at a snappy tempo, Johann Kaspar Mertz's swirling *Tarantella* made a terrific concluding work.

All this recital needed was the backdrop of an eccentric old public house and a pint of the proprietor's best bitter at your elbow.

The encore — “Prelude” from Barrios’ *La Catedral*



Elegant and deeply communicative, Czech Republic guitarist **Petra Polácková** is such a popular guest artist on the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival that it was entirely fitting that her 4 pm recital on Sunday, June 8 should be the last notes heard in the 2025 Festival.

Playing a 9-string guitar, Polácková raised the curtain on her set with Václav Tomáš Matějka’s *Grand Sonate No. 2*. In the opening *Moderato*, she produced a lovely sound with excellent voicing and pacing. Her *Andante con Expressione* was simply beautiful.

Her “*Variations sur l’air allemande par Haydn*” were nicely phrased, and she dispatched complicated technical passages with a shrug.

Taking up a six-string instrument for the Segovia version of Manuel Maria Ponce’s *Sonata Romantica*, Polácková created a lovely *Allegro moderato* and a lyrical *Andante espressivo*, then changed up to a lively *Allegretto vivo* that seized attention and an *Allegro non troppo e serioso* bedecked with gorgeous colors.

The guitarist returned to her 9-string instrument for the second half of the program. Having just released a new recording of the guitar music of Joseph Kaspar Mertz, Polácková tucked three of his *6 Schubert’sche Lieder* into her playlist on Sunday. Fully aware of the pianistic quality of Mertz’s character pieces, she conjured up a beautiful deep sound for “*Lob der Thränen*,” crafted a “*Liebesbotschaft*” that surged with passion, and a fully satisfying guitar version of “*Aufenthalt*.”

Polácková wasn’t through transmitting her fascination with Metz and his adaptations of music from keyboard to fingerboard. From *Bardenklänge*, Op.13, a collection of virtuoso solo pieces referencing the poetry of the fictitious 3rd century bard Ossian, she played “*Gondoliera*” with precision and attractive phrasing, and presented “*Liebeslied*” as a lovely, intimate story.

More Mertz: In the “*Fantasie Originale*” from his *3 Morceaux*, Op. 65, the guitarist traversed the instrument, taking her time and letting it flow naturally. It concluded with a big scale passage. In “*Fantasie Hongroise*,” she leaned into the bass lines, turning flurries of technical passages into a great dance tune.

For the encore — another piece by Mertz.

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