

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: Recitals by the Patterson-Sutton Duo & Jason Vieaux,

by Kevin McLaughlin

The Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival just keeps getting better and better. For 2025, there are masterclasses, lectures, a youth competition, guitar-maker showcases, and several headliner recitals by guitar royalty — a heady blend, whether you're a die-hard or a casual listener. The concerts were held in the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall, an acoustic and sensory jewel of a room to hear music in, especially the soft-spoken kind.



On Friday June 6, cellist Kimberly Patterson and guitarist Patrick Sutton — the Patterson-Sutton Duo — offered a varied and vivid program, moving easily from the folk-infused music of Wales to more contemporary sounds. Their taut and expressive playing balanced the program's strands of tradition and invention.

Stephen Goss's *Welsh Folk Songs*, a suite of six traditional melodies arranged for cello and guitar, opened the program. The work communicates the rich folk heritage of Wales and allowed both instrumentalists to evoke a world of fable and memory.

“David of the White Rock” set the tone with deep emotional undercurrents in a haunting farewell attributed to the dying harpist David Owen. The comparative lightness and rhythmic lift of “As I Went with Deio to Tywyn” found a natural ally in Sutton's playful accompaniment. Patterson and Sutton rendered the soft contours of “Lullaby,” one of the best-known Welsh melodies, with restrained melancholy.

The love song, “White Rose of Summer,” was gently shaped by Patterson's warm cello

playing, filling the hall with songful, expansive bow strokes. In “Fair Lisa,” a poignant lament for a lost beloved, Patterson again transported the audience to a distant realm. The rustic frolic, “Hunting the Hare,” proved the Welsh know how to dance as well as sing.

Raffaele Bellefronte’s *Suite No. 1 for Cello and Guitar* (1994) is a compact, four-movement set that expresses itself unabashedly and broadly, from the lyrical to the explosive. The composer’s fondness for jazz and popular idioms enlivens things, as did the personality of the players, who found inspiration in this stylized bandstand sampler.

Here Patterson showed the full range of her expressive toolkit — delineating lush, romantic lines in *Romantico*, then digging in with percussive heat in *Histerico*. Sutton, for his part, was both rhythmic engine and colorist, tapping the soundboard for added zest, then flipping a switch into arpeggiated lyricism. A fiery take on *Tango* closed the set, as the duo sashayed with Piazzolla-like abandon.

Piazzolla’s “Nightclub 1960,” from his *Histoire du Tango*, came next. By this point in his chronology, the tango has left the dance floor and entered the concert hall but is steeped in jazz harmonies and classical modernism. The cello-guitar version helps to deepen the music’s expressive range. Patterson leaned into the smoky lyricism with her sultry slides and gritty attacks, while Sutton brought clarity and rhythmic tension to the syncopated pulse.

Stephen Goss’s second contribution to the program, *Preludes or Postludes*, received its world premiere at this performance. Commissioned by the Patterson/Sutton Duo, the work comprises three short pieces — “Lively,” “Calm and Expressive,” and “Static” — which, Sutton said are intended “to serve as introductory or concluding works” in a recital setting.

Adapted from interludes in the composer’s *Theorbo Concerto*, the piece was given a performance of clarity, mystery, and invention. Each movement unfolded as a distinct portion: the first crisp and buoyant, the second quietly lyrical, and “Static,” with a poised, meditative stillness. Patterson and Sutton showed a keen awareness of the score’s shifting textures and understated drama.

In their performance of Mathias Duplessy’s *Sonata for Guitar and Cello in Four Dreams*, the Patterson-Sutton Duo closed the program with a technically dazzling display. By turns fierce, tender, and hallucinatory, the pair captured both the spirit and the virtuosity of the music.

Contemporary textures and flamenco flourishes burst into view in the opening

movement. In the slower, more introspective inner movements, the Duo found nuance and stillness, evoking dream states that felt cinematic and surreal. The final movement, with its steely groove and volatility, shifted the mood toward the ecstatic. Here, the Duo's sympathetic chemistry was on full display as they navigated abrupt changes in tempo, color, and intensity with what seemed like telepathic responsiveness.



The next night, Saturday evening, June 7, Jason Vieaux demonstrated the kind of artistic eloquence that any guitarist should aspire to. His playing was free of gratuitous display, instead Vieaux layered a deep understanding of the music and an ability to communicate its essence.

The concert began with Manuel Ponce's *Sonata Mexicana*, a smiling work originally written for — and with — Andrés Segovia, who, the program notes tell us, had a heavy hand in its creation. In the opening Allegro, Vieaux's

articulation was crisp but supple. In the Andante, Vieaux shaped each phrase with warmth and tasteful rubato. In "Cantos y Bailes Aztecas," a Mexican fiesta of syncopations and folksong, Vieaux's command of tonal color and pacing gave the piece cohesion, flair, and charm.

In his own composition, *Tidal Pools*, Vieaux offered a shimmering miniature that felt both intimate and pleasingly expansive. A beautiful, melodic riff evoked gently eddying ocean waters. Subtle dynamic swells and finely graded tone color gave the piece a tactile presence, its quiet surface belying emotional depth beneath. As Vieaux allowed each phrase to breathe and each resonance to settle, a summer wind seemed to blow.

Jason Vieaux's refined interpretation of J.S. Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1*, honored the work's roots while making full use of the guitar's expressive palette. Particularly satisfying was his subtle and inventive approach to ornamentation on the repeats of each phrase. The result felt like overhearing a great musician's personal conversation with Bach, deferential but contributing fresh nuance.

After intermission came an arrangement of J.S. Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro, BWV 998 in which Vieaux revealed a hybrid of faithfulness to the original lute/keyboard score and a sensitivity to the advantages of the modern guitar.

The prelude unfolded in long, singing lines, and in the fugue, articulation and weight gave each voice a distinct contour. The Allegro sparkled with rhythmic wit and subtle rubato.

Vieaux's *Home* elicited pure grace from the performer. Composed in April 2020, during the early months of the pandemic, the piece is a musical meditation on stillness and emotional grounding. Continuous pianissimo tremolos revealed the guitarist's dazzling technical control. Hushed dynamics and subtly shaded timbres invited the listener into something deeply intimate and confidential.

Two works by Isaac Albéniz concluded the program — *Mallorca* and *Rumores de la Caleta* (Murmurs from the Small Cove). *Mallorca* unfolded like a restless nocturne: a headlong stream of darkly-hued arpeggios. *Rumores de la Caleta* was sensuous and undulating, aided by Vieaux's impeccably controlled voicing. The habañera rhythm pulsed from low strings beneath, while upper melodic lines rose and receded like the Andalusian tide.

Two encores followed. The first, played with otherworldly sweetness, was 'Por Ti Mi Corazón' from Ponce's *Tres Canciones Populares Mexicanas*. When the audience's applause refused to let him leave the stage, Vieaux responded with *Misionera* by Fernando Bustamante — a spectacular showpiece which had him brandishing his guitar like a Matador's cape.

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