

An Tran takes a beautiful “risk” in Cleveland Classical Guitar Society debut (Mar. 7)

by Stephanie Manning



No matter their theme, most classical guitar concerts eventually circle around to a piece by one of the instrument’s most famous composers. Agustín Barrios. Heitor Villa-Lobos. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. But none of those names appeared on the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society’s program on March 7.

“As you can see, everybody’s still alive,” An Tran said of the composers he chose for his concert at the Maltz Performing Arts Center. The Chicago-based, Vietnam-born guitarist made his Cleveland debut with a collection of music written almost exclusively for him — much of it drawn from his upcoming album, *Illumina*.

In an [interview](#) with ClevelandClassical.com’s Mike Telin, Tran said that his manager calls it “risky” to do this kind of programming. If it is a risk, his performance showed exactly why that’s a risk worth taking.

Well-trained in the repertoire of the guitar greats, Tran clearly used that experience to develop his personal artistic identity, which focuses on contemporary commissions and music from or about his home country. The back half of his program featured pieces by three Vietnamese composers, some from Tran’s 2020 album *Stay, My Beloved*.

In pieces like Đặng Ngọc Long’s *Núi Rừng Tây Nguyên* (Central Highlands of Vietnam), Tran captured the sounds of Vietnam in a captivating “musical painting,” using extended techniques to capture the hushed sound of the wind, bird song, and the sounds of a carnival.

Other selections drew influence from folk songs. Khiem Nguyen-Duy’s *Toccata on “Lý Kéo Chài”* and *Variations and Fugue on “Ru Em”* (Xê Đăng Lullaby) both wove traditional melodies into fun and virtuosic pieces. The Fugue felt especially assured in

Tran's hands — he brought out the echoing melodies as if they were two distinct instruments in one.

The-An Nguyen's *Thánh Gióng* (The Legend of the Bamboo Child) traces the arc of the famous Vietnamese folktale across six short movements, from a peaceful childhood to epic conflicts. Tran's fingers confidently slid up and down the fretboard before his dramatic four-finger trill marked the protagonist's ascent to the heavens.

Thánh Gióng is already a well-known Vietnamese guitar work, but Tran also brought another piece by The-An Nguyen — *Ru Con* (Lullaby), which the composer wrote specifically for him. Influenced by the loss of Nguyen's mother, this sweet melody turns more somber, and Tran took extra care with the vibrato.

The theme of the parent-child relationship resurfaced frequently. During the first half of the program, Sara d'Ippolito Reichert's nostalgic *Bella di Papà* explored the relationship between the composer and her father after his passing. And Olga Amelkina-Vera captured the joyful chaos of childhood with *Ana-Lucía*, named for Tran's then-two-year-old daughter.

After little Ana-Lucía danced around while listening to her father practice a piece by Paul Ibbotson, the composer named it *Little Dancer*. Tran paired that swirly little piece with Ibbotson's energetic and ornamented *Prelude in E minor*.

The guitarist's confident strumming emphasized the spirit of adventure and freedom in Juan Erena's *Amanda*. But more memorable was Erena's gorgeous *Find You Again*, inspired by the composer's travels to Hanoi. While the city is often bustling, this piece leans reflective and is full of upward arpeggios, as if the listener is on a journey to reunite with their loved ones.

Tran's album *Illumina* won't be released on streaming services until August, so audiences will have to wait to hear much of this lovely music again — that is, unless you were one of the lucky concertgoers who snagged a physical copy.

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