

Italian Guitarist Nicolò Spera: An afternoon of new music

By Mike Telin



“The first thing I do before I contact a composer to ask them to write a piece is listen to their music. If it doesn't speak to me, why would I spend the money and the time?” Italian guitarist Nicolò Spera said during a recent Zoom conversation. “And if it does speak to me, I think it can speak to anyone.”

On Sunday, June 7 at 1:00 pm in Mixon Hall at CIM as part of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival, Spera will present a program of new works, four of which will be world premieres. Jonathan Leathwood will present a pre-concert lecture at 11:30 am. Tickets are available [online](#).

Spera said that all of the composers on his program have two things in common — a dazzling imagination and a sense of refinement. “I find that I’m drawn to music that has this inner elegance, which to me carries depth. And all of these composers only write what is really important. If something is there just to show off, then it doesn't become part of their music. So this program isn’t meant to be a statement about new music, it’s just very beautiful, genuine music that happened to be written in the last few years, or in some cases, in the last few weeks.”

Spera will open his program with the world premiere of Roxana Panufnik’s *Canto*. The guitarist said that he was aware that Panufnik was extremely busy and that getting her to write a piece for one instrument might be difficult. But while looking

through her catalogue he discovered *Canto* for solo viola. “I looked at it and I loved it so I thought I would ask her if she thought it could work on guitar and with her approval, I would like to play it. We worked together on the transcription and she liked it and I love it. So that’s how it happened.

Canto will be followed by world premiere No. 2 by Italian guitarist, composer, and good friend Lorenzo Micheli. “I wanted to perform *The Book of Trees* because he was supposed to be at the Festival and I thought it would be a wonderful occasion for the premiere. And then, of course, he had visa issues.”

World premiere No. 3 will be Carter Pann’s *Cinque Pezzi per l’intuizione Italiana*. “Carter is American — he’s actually a colleague of mine at UC Boulder — and because I’m Italian, he wrote everything in Italian. I think he speaks a little bit of Italian, but when he was a student, he spent some time in Italy. So this was his chance to pay tribute to his love of Italy and Italian culture.”

Spera said that the work’s final movement, ‘La Luce di Caravaggio,’ was written first. And since this was Pann’s first composition for guitar, they spent time together figuring out what worked and what didn’t. “Being that we work in the same building and teach at the same time he would always come to me with some ideas for each movement. So it was a very fun project.”

World Premiere No. 4 will be Martin Bresnick’s *What Do I Know? Essais*. Bresnick has taught composition at the Yale University School of Music since 1981. “He’s going to be 80 this fall,” Spera said. “I asked him if he wanted to write a piece for solo guitar, and I told him that I had a lot of ideas. He said let me listen to what you’ve been doing and get back to you. And then he wrote back and said I love your playing and I love the pieces you’ve been recording, and here is what I would like to do if you agree.”

Bresnick suggested writing a piece inspired by the essays of the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne who is famously remembered for his remark, “What do I know?”

“What I said earlier about elegance and nothing being superfluous, is definitely true in this piece, I think he really shaved off anything that doesn’t need to be there. It’s all very well-written — just one note at a time.”

Spera’s program will also feature Christopher Theofanidis’ *Spring Verses for flute and guitar*, a set of six galliards and pavaues, and *Vague Stelle dell’Orsa for guitar, flute, and viola*, both of which were written for Nicolò Spera.

“Cristina Jennings teaches at UC Boulder and is my favorite flutist, and violist Matthew Dane is her husband. Chris wrote *Spring Verses* for me and Cristina because he wanted to see how that was going to work. And since it worked quite well, he said, okay, let’s try the trio.

Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa... (Lovely stars of the Bear) is the opening verse of Giacomo Leopardi’s 1829 poem *Le ricordanze* (The Recollections).

“I wanted it to be a piece dedicated to my mom because one of the things we share is a love for Leopardi’s poetry. And this particular poem talks about being homesick and how difficult it is to be an immigrant away from home. So there are a lot of emotions in this piece.”

Closing our conversation, Spera said that he is humbled to be part of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival for a second time. “Everyone’s such an amazing guitarist and musician. And the venue is fantastic. It’s really one of the most beautiful, inspiring places to sit down and play your music for an audience. I loved it last time and I know I will love it again.”

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