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Guitarist Berta Rojas celebrates Paraguay and says a thank-you to Cleveland (Oct. 17)

by Stephanie Manning

After four years, Berta Rojas returned to Cleveland, and she didn't come alone.

Not only did the Paraguayan guitarist assemble a number of friends and collaborators for her October 17 performance at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, but she also brought "La Rojita" — her beloved guitar that was stolen days before her Cleveland debut in 2022.

The Cleveland Classical Guitar Society and the local music community supported Rojas through that ordeal, which thankfully culminated in the return of her precious instrument. Although she played most of this concert on another guitar, her return to the Society's International Series became a sweet way to say "thank you."

The OPUS 216 String Quartet joined Rojas as her first collaborator of the evening, journeying from Astor Piazzolla's 20th-century *Histoire du Tango* to Domenico Zipoli's 18th-century *Suite II: The Guaraní Baroque*. The quartet hit a few stumbling blocks with coordination in these early pieces, but Rojas retained her easy smile and joyful playing, especially in the trills and flourishes of the Zipoli.

When the quartet rejoined for another set of works at the end of the concert, things felt more settled, leaving extra time to appreciate the lovely combination of string and guitar timbres. A highlight was the *Suite Pu Rory*, a delightful arrangement of works by Paraguayan composers Herminio Giménez, Carlos Talavera, Enrique Riera, and Demetrio Ortiz.

Pu Rory, which translates to "festive sounds" in the Guaraní language, is also found in the name Ensemble Pu Rory, a group of young Paraguayan guitarists that Rojas mentored. The guitarist is a strong advocate for her home country, and at the heart of this

program was a celebration of Paraguayan music, with the majority of composers either from the country or with a strong connection to it.

Mario Clavall's "Quisiera Ser" was a tribute to the music of Paraguay, as was Demetrio Ortiz's *Recuerdos de Ypacaraí*. Vocalist Gabriela Martinez joined Rojas for both works, and the performers each brought out the themes of lost love and longing.

Fellow guitarist Colin Davin also appeared throughout the program, first with Santiago de Murcia's *Huella de Códice*. The two guitarists created a beautiful blend and friendly musical rapport, especially in the question-and-answer dialogue of the third movement, where Davin's part became more percussive.

Later, the duo tackled Oscar Cardoza Ocampo's melancholic yet hopeful *Renacer* and the joyful, virtuosic anthem *Danza Paraguaya* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré — who Rojas described as "Paraguay's greatest composer."

Two other works by Barrios Mangoré formed the only solo section of the evening, where Rojas finally brought out "La Rojita" to make her long-awaited Cleveland debut. The guitarist said that while "La Rojita" mostly stays safe at home these days, she didn't want to pass up the opportunity to give "a serenade to Cleveland, from the bottom of our hearts."

Both *Ca'azapá* and *Jha Che Valle* emphasized the warm, comforting sound of the guitar and of Rojas' playing. They felt like the perfect way to say "welcome back."

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