

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Paul Galbraith at Plymouth (March 17)

by Nicholas Stevens



Let's clarify this right away: Paul Galbraith, the Scottish guitarist, plays a custom-built, 8-stringed instrument that sets him apart in the classical guitar world. Called the "Brahms guitar" after the first piece Galbraith transcribed for it — that composer's *Variations on an Original Theme* for piano — it allows the player to tackle a wide range of transcribed repertoire thanks to its two extra strings: a bass A, and a high A. He plays the instrument upright, cello-style, its end pin inserted into a resonating box. Coverage of his work often notes this unusual setup. However, in a concert last week in Shaker Heights, that setup soon became the least remarkable thing about his performance.

Galbraith's fine shadings of tone and timbre stole the show in this solo concert at Plymouth Church on Saturday, March 17, presented under the auspices of the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society.

At the start of the *Allemande* from Bach's *French Suite in c*, the minor-mode melody floated along as though buoyed by an icy breeze. Galbraith differentiated between "contrapuntal" voices early on, with melodies ringing out only to be answered by echoes with completely different tone qualities. The *Courante* swayed gently. Omitting the *Sarabande*, Galbraith moved into an *Air* that reached resolution in a languorously splayed-out final chord. The *Menuet* had a melancholic grace, and the *Gigue* bristled with punchy, almost stifled notes.

The advantages of that extra bass string became clear in Galbraith's arrangement of Scriabin's Op. 11, No. 17, the warm opening of a suite fashioned from his miniature keyboard Preludes. String harmonics enriched Op. 2, No. 2, and the variance in timbre

that Galbraith displayed all evening distinguished Op. 16, No. 4. Closing out the set, Op. 11, No. 21 had the comforting luminescence of a meadow at sunset.

Three selections by Isaac Albéniz followed. Galbraith flew through the opening of *Torre Bermeja* with no apparent effort, and as with all of the Albéniz pieces, the return of the initial melody after a divergent middle section elicited a thrill of recognition. Galbraith's rendition of *Mallorca* was the highlight of the evening, with the nocturnal, haunting bassline of the first tune returning despite the heavenly glow surrounding the contrasting middle melody. Even the dark patch in *Sevilla* had a certain honeyed tone, the outer portions a sun-soaked dance.

Galbraith reserved his most substantial set for the latter half of the program. By transposing Haydn's keyboard *Sonata* in c-sharp minor (Hob. 16, No. 36) up to e minor, and juxtaposing its three movements with the finale of Haydn's *Sonata* in E major (Hob. 16, No. 31), Galbraith created a grand-scale symphonic form. Bold rhythmic decisions added substantial interest to this part of the program, in which Haydn's keyboard music proved less persuasive as raw material for guitar transcription than that of Bach or Scriabin.

Called back for an encore, Galbraith played Robert Schumann's "Mignon" from *Album for the Young*. This simple piano piece sounded wonderful, with Galbraith plucking the bass notes at the center point of the low strings, where they ring the clearest. Allowing the melody to rush and recede, Galbraith demonstrated that, irrespective of the instrument, technique and attention to detail remain essential characteristics of the true artist.

Photo: Erik Mann.

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