

Review

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Edel Muñoz at Plymouth Church (November 16)

by James Flood



Classical guitarist Edel Muñoz performed at Plymouth UCC Church in Shaker Heights on Friday, November 16th as part of the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's 2012-2013 Master's Series. He played before a crowd of what appeared to be over 100 guests, demonstrating the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's growing reputation since beginning just a year ago to bring performers of international status to Cleveland.

A relatively young Cuban guitarist with over twenty first-place awards in international competitions (achieved in a remarkably short amount of time), Edel Muñoz is a virtuoso of the highest order. He plays with a prodigious technique that affords him complete freedom to do as he wills musically. His interpretations are fresh, engaging and beautiful. His precision is flawless. Through the entire evening not a single buzzed note could be perceived.

Muñoz opened the program with a transcription of the lovely keyboard *Sonata in A Major, K. 208* of Domenico Scarlatti. Here Muñoz quickly established his sure hands, playing with a warm tone and crafting delicate and clean melodic lines. His use of ornamentation was generous. Interestingly, rather than executing trills with left hand slurs, he favored plucking trills with his right hand, a more difficult means, but one that yields a more brilliant sound, and it was effected with ease.

J.S. Bach's *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro, BWV 998*, a staple of classical guitar repertoire, followed the Scarlatti. Performances of this beautiful and exciting work invite plenty of comparisons as it has been done by so many players. Nevertheless, it proved to be a crowd favorite. What was immediately striking was Muñoz's relatively fast tempo in the *Fugue*, which is usually conceived as a slow work. Muñoz even increased the tempo upon entering the work's extended middle arpeggio-rich section.

This was the first indication that Muñoz often plays works at faster tempos than are typically done. Why does he do this? Because he *can*. Muñoz has such command of the instrument that such tempos are an option for him. But these tempos never sound rushed, pushed or strained. He still maintains full control of fine tonal colors, phrasing, and dynamics, generously throwing in ornaments when appropriate to boot.

At times he is aggressive, and then at a moment's notice he shifts to a light touch, all with the effect of sounding very natural. The *Allegro* movement was played at a tempo that might be the fastest this reviewer ever heard for the work. Muñoz gave an exciting and masterful performance of this movement, even adding a repeat of the final phrase that put his unique stamp on the oft-played work.

Other works included on the program were Aguado's *Andante et Rondo, No. 2*, Brouwer's *Elogio de las Danza*, and two lively Cuban works, one by Eduardo Martin, the other by Nico Rojas. Muñoz's performance of the nineteenth-century guitar composer, Dionisio Aguado, further displayed his complete mastery. Brouwer's *Elogio de las Danza* was given an appropriately intense and stirring interpretation. The two delightful Cuban works *Mirandote* and *Guajira a me Madre* opened the second half. The *Guajira a Mi Madre* was especially spirited and fun.

As the penultimate work of the program, Muñoz performed another staple of the guitar repertoire, Joaquin Rodrigo's *Invocation y Danza*. Ranked as a difficult work of the guitar repertoire, once again, Muñoz played it at a faster tempo than is typically done. From start to finish, Muñoz showed his complete control, giving a stirring and authoritative performance of the highly-regarded work. His playing in the extended tremolo section was extremely free and clean.

For classical guitar geeks, it is interesting to note that Muñoz uses rest stroke *very* sparingly. Even fast scales were done with free stroke. In the big scale moments of the *Invocation y Danza*, Muñoz opted for the lighter and typically less speedy free stroke. But speed was never sacrificed, and the lighter scales brought a unique rendering of these moments. In general, one would have to strain to find any fault with Muñoz's playing, but if there is any, it is his surprising reticence to use even just a slight vibrato on the upper frets on the treble strings, just the moment when the guitar most needs the help of a subtle vibrato for good sound. That's odd because at the same point on the neck on bass strings he's very generous with vibrato. But this is nit-picking. Muñoz is a guitarist who will likely establish himself as one of the best in the world.

Muñoz closed with an exciting and spirited performance of Federico Moreno Torroba's *Sonatina*. As expected, his playing of the *Allegretto* and *Allegro* were faster than usually heard, but again with no sacrifice of tone or phrasing, even maintaining the different emphases of beats so important in such a rhythmic work. Appropriately, Muñoz sped up the 16th note subdivisions to achieve a truly Spanish style. The *Andante* was heartfelt, entrancing, and beautiful. Upon the conclusion of the *Allegro* the entire audience was on its feet in a matter a seconds. Then Muñoz whipped off a Piazzola encore with rhythmic panache to yet another immediate standing ovation.

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