

## Review

### Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Marcin Dylla at First Unitarian, Shaker Heights (April 5)

by James Flood



The young Polish guitarist, Marcin Dylla, delivered the final concert of the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's Master's Series on Friday, April 5 at First Unitarian Church in Shaker Heights. Dylla has been sweeping competitions around the world, earning 19 first-place awards with his exceptionally refined playing.

Dylla opened the program with Manuel Ponce's *Sonata Romantica*, an homage to Franz Schubert. The work showcases Ponce's compositional talent in writing a substantive work imitating the style of Schubert, with undulating melodies and, at times, rich chromaticism. Marcin Dylla's playing is eminently smooth. His touch is gentle. Even his physical gestures bespeak the approach he takes, his arms and hands very fluid and relaxed.

The *Sonata Romantica's* first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, was delicately and expertly articulated, everything very cleanly played. The second movement, the *Andante*, allowed one to see just how legato Dylla can play, handling full chords with the soprano carrying the melody, yet the melody sounding as smooth as if it were played as a single line. In the final movement, the *Allegro non troppo e serio*, he displayed quick and crisp arpeggio work.

The second work was by the Finnish composer Magnus Lindberg. Of all the works on the program, *Mano a Mano* showed off Dylla's ample virtuosic capabilities, supplying over ten minutes of fast scales, arpeggios, harmonics and passages that required the left hand to tirelessly run up and down the entire fretboard. But *Mano a Mano*, written in a more or less traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century melodic and harmonic language, gives the audience no melodies to hang on to, nor any recognizable thematic material, and no clear structure.

Dylla played the work with passion and conviction, expertly negotiating a variety of fast sections, slow sections, loud sections and soft sections. But despite the range of emotion, dynamics and tempi, the net effect of *Mano a Mano* was a long series of moods that failed to engage on either an emotional or intellectual level.

The second half of the program began with a transcription of Anton Diabelli's *Sonata in F Major*. As usual, Marcin played this classical period work with complete refinement,

employing a clean classical articulation where appropriate, and full legato lines when called for, particularly in the *Andante* movement. The finale employed contrapuntal writing with which Dylla delineated very cleanly. Transcriptions of three Schubert songs (*Lob der Tränen, Ständchen, and Die Post*) by 19<sup>th</sup> century guitarist and composer Johann Kaspar Mertz followed.

It was probably first in the Diabelli that something seemed lacking, but given Dylla's complete mastery and musicianship it was very hard to pinpoint. During the final two works, I was finally able to put a finger on it.

Marcin Dylla is a player of the utmost refinement. His tone is beautiful, his phrasing is lovely and heartfelt. His minute control is such that all aspects of the music are extremely well-placed. But one could also say that his playing is soft around the edges. He generally avoids digging in to produce bold *fortes*, but he also avoids bold *pianissimos* as well. His tonal palette never ventures out of a middle range of color. His undulating phrases are beautifully done, but they are similar in kind and avoid dramatic peaks, so that towards the end of the evening, things began to sound a bit the same.

This sameness may have been partly due to the repertoire which was weighted toward 19<sup>th</sup> century-style writing, but that doesn't explain everything. Many times long, dense repertoire can leave an audience spell-bound. Nevertheless, something can be said for inserting one or two familiar crowd-pleasers, if only to offer the human brain a necessary respite before returning to the weightier and less familiar material.

Dylla deliberately avoided such pieces, explaining to the audience before the closing work, Granados's *Valses Poeticos*, that he didn't want to close with a "show-piece." He then gave a rendering of the Granados that was lovely, but lacked any the drama one typically expects from this Spanish composer. He declined to do an encore amidst a standing ovation.

But it is no mystery that Dylla has been dominating guitar competitions world-wide and is performing his Carnegie Hall debut this week. There are simply few guitarists who can play with his finesse, musicality, and command.

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