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*The L.A. Guitar Quartet and Pepe Romero*

## **Austin Goes Classical**

Dell Hall, Long Center for the Performing Arts June 23-26

Prior to last week, I had but a passing acquaintance with classical guitar – you know, the kind that, if you met on the street, you'd greet with a cordial smile and handshake. Sure, I'd grown up knowing Andrés Segovia as a legend on the instrument (and even knowing a bit of his music) and, given its incessant repetition on Top 40 radio, knew *intimately* Mason Williams' guitar work on "Classical Gas," but beyond that and the odd run-in with Christopher Parkening or Julian Bream, I didn't know my Assad from a hole in the ground. **While a few concerts hasn't transformed me into a connoisseur of the instrument, my immersion last week in Austin Goes Classical – the series of events put together by the Austin Classical Guitar Society for the Guitar Foundation of America's 2010 convention – has boosted my familiarity to the degree that I'd now greet classical guitar with the beaming countenance and bear hug reserved for a dear friend.**

Collectively, the events showcased a **repertoire of astonishing breadth and variety**, extending back centuries yet still expanding today, **and a virtuosity by its practitioners that was breathtaking, as often for the subtlety and depth of emotion in the playing as for the speed with which their fingers worked the strings. They expanded my sense of what classical guitar is or can be.**

That began with *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote: Words and Music From the Time of Cervantes*, an ambitious attempt to marry traditional classical-guitar repertoire – here, music from 16th and 17th century Spain – with theatre: an adaptation of Cervantes' novel. **The music, played masterfully by the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, and the text, acted with delightful flair by the Firesign Theatre's Phil Proctor, were performed simultaneously – a risky choice by creator Bill Kanengiser of the LAGQ as it gave away most of the limelight to the actor. At times one wanted the music to have room to breathe; still, it was revelatory to hear classical guitar work as a collaborator in drama, grounding us in the period and setting and adding dimension to the feelings in the text.**

The next night, the concert pairing UT's Butler School of Music guitar professor Adam Holzman with the school's resident string quartet, the Miró Quartet, expanded that sense of classical guitar as collaborator to show how comfortably the instrument can nestle into a chamber ensemble. Trading phrases in Giuliani's *Sonata* for violin and guitar, Holzman and violinist Daniel Ching were as playful as siblings making up a game. And Holzman was equally at home with the full ensemble, his serenely expressive playing bringing an entirely new set of colors to the sound of a traditional string ensemble.

**And when the LAGQ and Pepe Romero performed with the Austin Symphony Saturday night, the guitar's distinctive sound gave a new hue to the orchestral palette**

**as well: Combining the flowing lyricism of the bowed string instruments with the nimble, percussive drama of the piano, it gave the grand ensemble an ineffably personal touch.** This was especially true in *Concierto de Aranjuez*, in which Romero, with exquisite finesse, plumbed the depths of Rodrigo's heart-wrenching score such that it felt as if he'd suffered its tragedies himself.

**These events will live long in my memory for the reasons most concerts do, for the resonance of the music and the rich musicianship at play.**

But the other Austin Goes Classical events I attended were memorable more for the unconventional ways they offered the community to engage with classical guitar. Having Master Pancake Theater mock Ralph Macchio's eminently mockable film *Crossroads* may not have had done much to promote the instrument, but the collective joy of 800 people sharing the experience on the Long Center City Terrace proved it a brilliant bit of programming by Austin Classical Guitar Society Director Matthew Hinsley. Likewise, the inclusion of popular children's act the Biscuit Brothers, who shared the stage with the LAGQ, opened the door to classical guitar for Austin's youngest citizens – and they listened much more quietly and attentively than I'd have imagined. Last but not least, the performance of the Guitar Foundation of America Youth Orchestra, conducted by Dr. Michael Quantz, was a moving testament to the future of the instrument; the 200 young musicians covered every foot of the Dell Hall stage, and the enthusiasm and commitment evident in every pluck and strum of the strings was its own stirring song.

Six events, one for each nylon string on the classical guitar, and like those strings played by a master, they made the most exceptional sounds.