

Review of Michael Cedric Smith Guitar Recital – April 22, 2025 Humanities Department.

On April 22nd 2025, Prof. Michael Cedric Smith presented a generous classical guitar recital for the Humanities Department's *Works in the Works* lecture and performance series that showcased thirteen pieces by seven Spanish and Latin-American classical guitar composers of the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth-century. Prof. Smith, on this occasion, brought his decades-long experience as a performer, composer, teacher to works inspired by traditional folk and dance music. The works performed all employed the traditional Spanish guitar method of fingering, where the bass line is plucked by the thumb, and the index, middle, and ring fingers simultaneously play the melodies and accompaniment. Moreover in this method, chords are strummed with the characteristic *rasgueado* technique, where the right hand makes a quick downward sweep of the fingertips starting with the pinky to create a dramatic effect, or an up and down strumming by the middle and index fingers to create fast rhythmic patterns.

Starting the program were three short Preludes by the Mexican composer Manuel Ponce (1882–1948), from a series of twenty-four preludes commissioned by Spanish virtuoso Andrés Segovia in the late-1920s. In *Prelude in A*, cascading, melancholy chords with hopeful resolutions are played in *tempo rubato*, where tempo is slightly increased or decreased for emphasis. Further, shifting bass notes and comely melodies lead to a pleasant conclusion of plucked harmonics and strumming. The next composition, *Prelude in F# Minor* begins with passages of deep emotional yearning and then modulates alternatively between brighter chords and more thoughtful progressions. This moody and

introspective piece ends with a sense of finality reminiscent of Polish composer Frédéric Chopin's *Piano Sonata No. 2 in Bb*, known as the *Funeral March*. Thirdly by Ponce was *Preludio*, a sprightly and cheerful work that sounds at once courtly and modern, and where stretched chord fingerings, quick fretboard runs, and time signature changes offer the listener a rich variety of musical forms and textures.

Prof. Smith next played were the works of Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909), founder of the modern school of classical guitar performance and technique and a follower of Frédéric Chopin, whose folk pieces inspired Prof. Smith's first selection by Tárrega, the sunny and pleasant *Mazurka en sol*, which is based on a traditional Polish folk dance. Its winding melodies trace the dancers' steps and turns and fretboard trills convey sweet, bucolic scenes with a sense of nostalgia. Next by was played the slow, stately duple-time *Pavana*, a romantic composition with beautifully repeating sections influenced by Renaissance-period Gavottes. Lastly by Tárrega was played *Danza Mora*, a piece associated with the old Moorish Spanish city of Mora, in which taut, prancing chords are combined with tumbling progressions, tight turns, and frenetic chord groupings woven into Arabian melodies and rhythms.

By Augustin Barrios Mangoné (1885–1944), the South American composer once touted as "The Paganini of Guitar from the Jungles of Paraguay," was heard a waltz influenced by European models but adapted to Venezuelan forms that liberate the note material from the dance context to become a waltz-figured modern theme punctuated by harmonics. For this work Prof. Smith employed a "drop-D" tuning for the low E string which adds a certain depth and richness not heard in standard tuning.

Lastly, attendees heard works by Venezuelan composer Antonio Lauro (1917–1986), a fervent cultural nationalist whose pleasant and lively Venezuelan waltzes ornamented with rapid *legato* or note-binding techniques known as “hammer-ons” and “pull-offs,” contain elements from Spanish and African traditions.

Though considered renowned historical works from a previous era, this group of compositions and melodies Prof. Smith played are far from obscure and on hearing them one recognizes the tremendous impact the genre had on the popular and rock music, and film soundtracks of the last half century or more.