

Mazurka Apassionata – Paraguayan guitarist and composer Agustín Pío Barrios is one of the most influential figures in the classical guitar genre. He began studying music at an early age and his instructor, Gustavo Sosa Escalda, taught the young Barrios pieces by the likes of Sor, Aguado, and Tárrega. By the age of thirteen he was considered a child prodigy and received a scholarship to the Colegio Nacional in Asunción, Paraguay. He went on to compose over 300 pieces for classical guitar and performed prolifically, often improvising in concert. Barrios was of Guaraní descent, a tribe native to Paraguay. This informed how he presented himself professionally, and first began calling himself “Nitsuga Mangoré”, with “Nitsuga” being his first name backwards and “Mangoré” being the name of a legendary Guaraní chieftain, but later simplified this to “Agustín Barrios Mangoré”. While using the name Nitsuga, he would also perform in traditional Paraguayan garb.

The music Barrios would compose could fall into three broad categories: folkloric, religious, and romantic. “Mazurka Apasionata” falls strongly in the romantic category, with mazurkas being a Polish dance (similar to a waltz, but with an emphasis put on the second beat) that was popular among romantic era composers, specifically the pianist Frédéric Chopin, who Barrios admired. The piece features a rich understanding of harmony as well as a deep understanding of the classical guitar itself, which can be heard in his lush chord voicings and beautiful melodies.

Sweet Ladyslipper – Frank Wallace was an American classical guitarist, lutenist, baritone and composer. While mostly known for classical guitar, he had an expansive knowledge of early music, inspiring him to become a skilled player of the vihuela de mano. His background in early music heavily influenced his compositional style. He often writes in old music forms, such as the cantiga and pavane (which both happen to be movements of “Sweet Ladyslipper”) but is informed by his knowledge of modern harmony. The works of Wallace often create a dense atmosphere of dissonance and unease while also maintaining the DNA of the forms he writes in, with moments of genuine beauty and emotion emerging from this density. “Sweet Ladyslipper” was written for his close friend and frequent collaborator, John Fleagle, who had sadly passed away.

The prelude is a bluesy but intense piece that blends together the musical worlds of Frank Wallace and John Fleagle, as he was an alum of Berklee School of Music and studied jazz. It features common blues guitar licks and pairs them with contrapuntal lines that are reminiscent of renaissance music but makes use of dissonant and eerie harmonies.

The second movement, “Pavane for a Dying Prince”, is a lament for a lost friend and calls back to Ravel’s “Pavane for a Dying Princess”. A pavane is a slow dance common to the baroque era, typically in duple time. The melody weaves between the four voices of the pavane, disappearing and reappearing nearly constantly.

The next movement I will be playing is the fifth, named “Cantiga”. A cantiga in medieval times would have consisted of just a single line of melody. This one does not, but it being called a cantiga brings a certain emphasis to the melody, and acts as a tribute to his friend’s lyricism.

The final movement, “Zar”, is based on an Egyptian dance meant to cure illness and makes great use of alternating odd meters and oud-like strummed sections.

The piece is named after a type of orchid, which Wallace had found the morning of his friend’s funeral.

Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro – Johann Sebastian Bach was a German Baroque composer and organist. He is one of, if not the most renowned composers to ever live. He was born into a musical family, so he began learning music at a young age, but had no formal education until he went to the local school in Ohrdruf, Germany. He traveled many times in his life, eventually landing in Leipzig, Germany, but through these years of travel he worked numerous important music jobs, such as being the kapellmeister for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen for several years. Once in Leipzig, he took the position of cantor for St. Thomas's Church, where he wrote and performed pieces weekly, which is partly why his musical output is so intimidatingly huge. In 1729, six years after being appointed cantor, he was now in charge of Schott'sches Collegium Musicum.

"Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro in E-flat Major" was written around 1735 while still employed by the college. It was most likely written to be performed on the Lautenwerck (a keyboard instrument similar to the harpsichord but with gut strings and a round underside to imitate the sound of the lute).

The Prelude is a standard Bach prelude, but still pretty, nonetheless. It introduces a theme built upon a fragmented major scale which comes together over the next two movements to become a complete descending presentation of the major scale.

The Fugue is interesting because it is only one of three fugues he wrote in ternary form, meaning there is the fugal "A" section, the developmental "B" section, and then a return of the "A" section. In this movement the theme from the Prelude begins to take form as a major scale presented in two halves and is used as the subject of the Fugue.

The Allegro is a fun and exciting movement where Bach's contrapuntal mastery shines almost as much as it does in the fugue. In this movement the theme from the Prelude, now having been developed in the Fugue, finally comes together as a complete descending major scale.

The piece is written in E-flat major, but often performed in D major on the classical guitar for sake of ease, however I will be playing it in the original key.

Usher Waltz – Nikita Koshkin is a Russian classical guitar composer and performer. He grew up having a deep appreciation for rock music, which was banned by the USSR during his childhood, so he had to listen in secret. Other early influences included Stravinsky and Shostakovich, which is as apparent as his rock influences in his compositions. His grandfather had given him a classical guitar and a recording of Segovia, which had inspired him to become a musician. He then began studying the classical guitar at a young age. Koshkin had gone on to study at the Moscow College of Music and the Gnessin Institute, where he also studied composition. His first piece to gain recognition internationally was a suite for solo guitar called "The Prince's Toys", which makes use of an expansive amount of extended techniques, making the guitar replicate other instruments, notably a snare drum at one point. This experimentation helped begin to solidify his place in the classical guitar canon, but it was his piece, "Usher Waltz", which I will be playing, that cemented his place.

"Usher Waltz" is inspired by the short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher", by Edgar Allan Poe. In the story, the narrator goes to help his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, who is not well both mentally and physically. The narrator's time staying with Roderick becomes increasingly uneasy, culminating in unknowingly burying Roderick's sister, Madeline, alive. The piece aims to capture the unease and increasing tension of Roderick's mental state. To do so, Koshkin makes use of his various rock and classical influences to create a creepy and haunting portrait of Roderick.

Libra Sonatine – Roland Dyens was a prolific performer and composer of the classical guitar. He was born in Tunisia, but spent most of his life in France, and eventually taught at the famous Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. He began playing the guitar at a young age, and at age thirteen he began studying with the renowned Spanish guitarist, Alberto Ponce. Dyens became known for his exciting and unique blend of classical guitar with various styles, especially jazz. His pieces display a love for dense harmonies and rhythms that push the boundaries of what we are used to with classical guitar music. He was also known to improvise frequently on stage, often beginning recitals with improvisations.

His composition, “Libra Sonatine”, showcases many of his strengths as a guitarist and composer, while also being deeply meaningful to him. This piece was inspired by a major heart surgery he underwent in the early 1980’s.

The first movement, “India” is meant to represent the chaos he felt in life leading up to the operation. This movement explores several different genres, such as tango and jazz ballads, possibly to represent the mixed emotions he felt. However, the genres of music presented are not explored evenly, further emphasizing the chaos and fear Dyens felt.

The second movement, “Largo”, is meant to represent his time under anesthesia in surgery. The movement is slow and peaceful, with the steady rhythm of the melody in the beginning representing the beep of the EKG machine. The piece goes on to lull the listener into a sense of calm through its complex, but still relaxing, jazz harmonies and almost feels like a dream.

The final movement, “Fuoco”, represents the liveliness and excitement he felt post-surgery. It is fast and unrestrained, featuring a variety of extended techniques that add to the frenetic energy of the movement. It serves as an intense and thrilling conclusion to the piece.