

Published May 2, 2023. Editor's headline: A Virtuoso comes to Cheyenne.

https://www.thecheyennepost.com/opinion/columnists/a-guitar-virtuoso-in-cheyenne/article_0d4bd6ac-e937-11ed-9600-cf1f88ca4910.html

On Thursday, April 27, 2023, at the Laramie County Library in Cheyenne, a friend and I attended a concert by an extraordinary musician. We seated ourselves in the second row, close enough to the stage we could observe Rafaël Feuillâtre's jaw-dropping virtuosity on the guitar. I felt alternately sad and enchanted that evening, heart and mind transported by the songs and Renaissance music I heard—the longing and the grieving interspersed with the sweetest of melodic lines, in a classical-guitar repertoire that ranged from Johan Sebastian Bach to present-day composers.

“My goal is always to allow the guitar to sing,” Monsieur Feuillâtre has said. “So many things in music start with song. The guitar is an intermediary between me and the audience that lets me sing and convey emotion.”

His first guitar, at age seven, was a plastic toy that so delighted him, his parents soon arranged formal guitar instruction. So says Russ Williams, founder and past president of the Cheyenne Guitar Society (CGS) which, together with the Library, arranged for the guitarist's appearance. Russ Williams and his spouse Barbara hosted the young man for the duration of his stay in Cheyenne, and M. Feuillâtre acknowledged the Williamses with a piece dedicated to the couple.

“He was in Cheyenne once before, playing at our [CGS] Valentine's dinner in February 2021. On his way to the next leg of his tour, it shut down because of COVID. While in Cheyenne, he gave a master class and workshop at Laramie County Community College. His work at lccc was heralded as a major event for the college's music department.”

The phrase “classical guitar” may refer to the instrumental finger technique common to classical guitarists—individual strings plucked with the fingernail or, less frequently, fingertip—but it can also mean the instrument's classical music repertoire.

Russ Williams started the Guitar Society many years ago when, a Cheyenne physician like his father, he was asked to sponsor a young Cuban, Ernesto Tamayo, who had won a major competition in Mexico City. On his dad's recommendation, the young man decided to seek asylum in the US.

“Ernesto got to Cheyenne in February, wearing a short-sleeved shirt,” said Williams. “My dad and I searched in our closets for winter clothes for Ernesto. My dad found him a sports coat. Then Cheyenne residents chipped in—boots, gloves, a coat, etc.”

“Ernesto had won a Peabody scholarship to study with a well-known guitarist but arrived penniless. We arranged his performance as a ‘benefit’ concert at a church, with the benefits—the donations—going toward Ernesto's immediate living expenses.”

Williams added that, when it snowed on the first day of the young man's arrival, it frightened him. He spoke very little English. "But I showed him my foggy breath was the same as his. Later that night he was shoveling snow."

Since then the CGS has had monthly meeting, which I attend whenever I can. Guitarists of all stripes attend—not just classical, but players of bluegrass, top-forties, ballads, and whatnot. Sometimes a mandolinist or a banjo player will join in. At every meeting, we sing and play a group song for which someone hands out sheet music of lyrics and chords. Plus, the organization helps sponsor musicians like Rafaël Feuillâtre.

At not yet twenty-seven, M. Feuillâtre is well known in the world of classical guitar, having made his international breakthrough as the 2018 winner of the prestigious Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) International Concert Artist Competition. Prior to that life-changing event, he performed at prize-winning competitions in Spain, France, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. He has recorded recital albums and toured the concert circuit of Europe, Brazil, Argentina, the US, and Canada. At Thursday's event he played practically nonstop, ignoring the intermission scheduled to allow him a breather.

"He must be practicing day and night," I said to Barbara Williams.

"Not while he was with us," she said. "He just wanted to soak in our hot tub," in the frigid Wyoming March.

Maybe he practiced while the Williamses were sleeping.

On Thursday, a most arresting performance was M. Feuillâtre's concluding piece, "Adios Nonino," a downhearted song stunningly performed by this talented musician. Its composer, Astor Piazzolla, was an Argentine virtuoso Bandoneón player—the Bandoneón is a type of concertina popular in South America. Piazzolla was concert-touring in 1959, far from his native Buenos Aires, when news reached him of his father's sudden death in a road accident. Unable to attend the funeral, Piazzolla composed this work in tribute to a dad he called Nonino. The sorrowful lament has since become a symbol of the Argentine diaspora.

M. Feuillâtre brought his own diaspora feeling to his performance of "Adios Nonino"—a furious anger alternating with tango-type phrasing. He was born in 1996, in Djibouti, a country on the northeastern coast of Africa the size of New Jersey, then in the grip of a civil war that did not end until 2001. He never knew his Djibouti parents nor, I imagine, what befell them during the civil war. Young Rafaël, having been adopted, grew up in the town of Cholet in western France. I wondered if his diaspora feeling extended to the native country he never knew yet whose mark he bears. He infused "Adios Nonino" with drum solos by hard-hitting the top side of his guitar with a flat right hand. At other times he mimicked the cello, even the concertina, in utterly engaging imitations on the guitar. To understand the feat, one must listen to "Adios Nonino" performed by cello and concertina, such as by the husband-wife team HAUSER & Ksenija Sidorova, at

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=385153072194749>

M. Feuillâtre's encore consisted of Francisco Tárrega's "Recuerdos de la Alhambra," "Memories of the Alhambra." The Alhambra is a famous citadel with beautiful gardens and museums, built by the Saracens after their invasion of Europe and settlement in Spain around 800 CE. The dark-skinned Muslim invaders brought with them their highly-developed knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, architecture and poetry, not to mention the Middle Eastern music and instruments, the oud and the drum among them, perhaps the Persian hammer dulcimer, which is said to have originated in Africa around 900 BCE. From the oud evolved the pot-bellied Italian mandolin, the Spanish guitar, the Irish harp, and the lute of the Renaissance. The ancient drum became today's drum set with its cymbals and brushes, from the hammer dulcimer the monochord, clavichord, and harpsichord, which later evolved into the piano but in its time was played (and composed for) by musicians from Bach to Mozart. All this history seems encapsulated in the Alhambra as the composer envisioned it.

Composer Francisco Tárrega was a guitarist blinded at four by a near-drowning. His parents apprenticed him with a blind guitarist, and the child thrived on the music-making. One wonders if Tárrega's memories of the Alhambra consisted entirely of his imaginative inner musings on the edifice and its surroundings. Recorded versions of "Recuerdos de la Alhambra" often add breathtaking images of the building and its gardens.

I myself have played a more modest Tárrega composition, "Lágrima"—"Teardrop"—which, I'm told, the composer wrote while on tour in England, yearning for his home in sunny Spain. Judging by his facial communications, M. Feuillâtre may have been aware of Sr. Tárrega's despondency, and how he made the most of it via his guitar.

Here is the link to Rafaël Feuillâtre's recorded rendition of "Recuerdos de la Alhambra." If you were unable to attend his exquisite live performance, this recording is a good substitute.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyhQy_wDqJM

The first time I heard "Recuerdos," I refused to believe it was the work of a single instrument, certain the tremolo came from a mandolinist backing up the guitarist. Watching an actual guitar performance of the piece made me a dumbfounded believer.

I was six when I learned to play the mandolin. My mother taught me in the bleakest of times. We were always hungry. East Germany (the West had the Marshall Plan) was trying to recover from a brutal Nazi regime and devastating war that laid waste, not only to my native country but also to most of Europe, Soviet Russia, and parts of Africa. My mother was hoping against hope she'd hear news about her missing-in-action husband, lost somewhere in the endless snows of Russia.

Sometimes it seems to me, "Recuerdos" is a bittersweet farewell to life, recalling its loveliest moments yet recognizing, it's time to let go. May we all be blessed with the grace to let go when the time comes. A guitar concert is a fleeting thing, yet it has much to teach us.

Thank you, Monsieur Feuillâtre.

(Attached pics: "Performance" courtesy Russ Williams; "Headshot" courtesy Joel Helleso)