

ANGEL ROMERO, JULIA TORGOVITSKAYA,

(and that other guy):

VERISIMILITUDE AND VERIDICALITY

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

#### INTRODUCTION

My essay makes sense only within the context of a certain concert, and a review of that concert, which was written by long-time St. Louis Post-Dispatch music critic Sarah Bryan Miller. I here reprint that concert's program, Miller's review, and my response to Sarah Bryan Miller's review. (It bears noting that the performance did not entirely follow the program.)

As I stated to a friend: "Sarah Bryan Miller threw a grenade. I responded with an artillery shell."

My friend commented wryly, "Yes; that's your usual way."

Indeed she is correct. As I often say to people, "There are two ways we must humbly look at every situation. There is the wrong way, and there is ... my way."

I: THE CONCERT PROGRAM (1-24-2015)

**-PROGRAM-**

Concerto in D Major for Lute, RV 93 Allegro Largo Allegro	Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741))
Anda, Jaleo Los Cuatro Muleros Nana de Sevilla Las Tres Hojas (pause) Los Pelegrinitos Sevillanas Del Siglo XVIII	Federico García Lorca (1898-1936)
Malagueña Fantasia	Celedonio Romero (1913-1996)

**-intermission-**

Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5	Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)
Dance No. 5 from <i>Danzas Españolas, Op. 37</i>	Enrique Granados (1867-1916)
Two Songs: Con Que La Lavare De Los Alamos Vengos	Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-1999)
Suite Andaluza Fantasia	Celedonio Romero

*As a courtesy to the artists and audience, cameras, tape recorders, signal watches, cellular phones, paging devices and firearms are not allowed in the concert hall during a performance. Please no smoking or eating in the concert hall. Please refrain from texting, tweeting, or otherwise using cell phones in the hall during the performance. Refreshments and restrooms are located in the Kemper Atrium lobby. Latecomers will be seated at the first convenient pause in the program. Public telephones are located in the Emerson building at the street level entrance.*

## II: SARAH BRYAN MILLER'S REVIEW



MONDAY

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## Guitarist Romero and his soprano both disappoint

**Review** • More rehearsal, more talent, more music, less talking might have saved concert — and didn't

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER  
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Recorded music is, above all else, reliable. You know exactly what you're going to hear, every time you play it; it never varies. Live music, in contrast, is unpredictable. With luck, you might hear a performance that is transcendently beautiful. With another kind of luck, you could find yourself at one that's transcendently bad.

Ángel Romero's concert on Saturday night at the Sheldon Concert Hall was of the latter variety.

It looked terrific on paper. St. Louis Classical Guitar Society president Bill Ash works hard to bring the best performers in the field to St. Louis. Romero is one of the greats, a well-established member of the "royal family of guitar." This had all the makings of a special occasion.

A couple of things got in the way. The first was Romero's decision to share the stage with a not-ready-for-prime-time soprano for more than half the evening.

Julia Torgovitskaya is an attractive young woman with a pleasant voice of no great distinction. She appeared in a memorably hideous gown of vivid pink poofiness, adorned with loops and sparklies. Unfortunately, her interpretive gifts did not compensate for it.

In the first half, she was virtually welded to the music for a group of songs by Federico García Lorca. They sounded desperately under-rehearsed, and she and Romero were not always together. The group was also interrupted by a planned pause between the fourth and fifth songs. That's a first, in my experience; breaks come at the ends of groups.

In the second half, Torgovitskaya was consistently sharp in Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5, and thus painfully out of tune with Romero. In her final ap-



Romero

pearance, a pair of songs by Joaquín Rodrigo, her coloratura was missing notes all over the place.

Romero's other problem was his tendency to get sidetracked by the hilarity of his own jokes and storytelling. At one point in the second half,

he started to play, then interrupted himself with laughter. That led to his sharing the first of two vomit-centric anecdotes, which would undoubtedly have been hilarious at the after-party.

Things weren't helped by someone's decision to turn up the house lights after the Lorca songs but before the scheduled finale of the first half. The befuddled audience waited a minute, then made for the exits. Romero finally reappeared, saw the crowd retreating, and announced that he'd play it in the second half.

That work, the "Malagueña Fantasia," was one of just two pieces on the program that he played entirely alone. Both of them were by his father, Celedonio Romero, and he played them very well, with feeling and with skill.

Romero performed two other works with accompaniment by pianist Peter Henderson. It took a movement for the Vivaldi Concerto in D Major for Lute to find its balance; after that, they played well together.

The fact, however, is that more time was spent on moving the piano and music stands, and on the telling of jokes and anecdotes, than was spent in performing music. That's not why we go to concerts.

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### III: HOW SARAH BRYAN MILLER GOT IT WRONG

In her review, "Guitarist Romero and His Soprano Both Disappoint," (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1-26-2015, p. A8, M 1) music reviewer Sarah Bryan Miller (aka SBM) seemed entirely out of her element. She levied a volley of scarcely-deserved criticism which here warrants a response.

Her view toward the soprano Julia Torgovitskaya was nothing less than snarky, taking her to task for her "hideous gown" with its "pink poofiness." Well, Torgovitskaya is Moscow born, and I would have called her gown "Regal Russian" with a hint of Spanish gypsy. Ergo, entirely appropriate for the evening's music. But SBM didn't like her voice either. I admit that Torgovitskaya is not quite a peer with the best Mozart or Schubert interpreters, but with this evening's repertoire (it is folk music, if you please!), I thought her voice perfect. If she and Angel Romero were not always quite together, to my scarcely unpracticed ear this sounded like interpretative variety that melded creative nuance, not under-rehearsed uncertainty as SBM judged it. And as for SBM's pronouncement that Torgovitskaya was consistently sharp in the Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5 by Villa-

Lobos, SBM is flat wrong. Torgovitskaya was occasionally slightly sharp (according to the perfect pitch my ears possess), and here arises an interesting musical phenomenon. Singers sometimes tend to sing sharp because of bad musicianship; other times singing slightly sharp results from enthusiasm. The latter has been noted and appreciated by music critics as eminent as Karl Haas and Jim Svejda, and by conductors as renowned as Fritz Reiner and Robert Shaw.

Torgovitskaya's rendition was actually only rarely and slightly sharp, which was clearly caused by an enthusiasm which occasioned a wonderfully unique rendering of this gorgeous piece as the Spanish folk song it is (however rarefied its flight!) instead of presenting it the way too many sopranos do it: as German lieder sung through a bull-horn.

And as for SBM's criticism that Torgovitskaya's "coloratura was missing notes"? I fear SBM does not know that one type of coloratura is embellishment. This was what I heard, and if SBM had been following this performance with a copy of the score, she might have been more admiring than critical.

Angel Romero of course was the main attraction, and while SBM believes his playing of the two works composed by his father was done "very well," I must

pronounce them superb. In fact, I have never heard a Malagueña played so well except by Carlos Montoya.

Overall, Angel Romero's visit to Saint Louis is something we can be proud of. There have been too many geriatric classical guitarists on the Saint Louis music scene of late (Paco Peña, Odair Assad) and I confess I went to this concert worried that Angel Romero, now in his late 60s, would fit this mold. Quite the contrary. His energy was vigorous, his technique flawless, his creativity unflagging. As for the "vomit-centric" anecdotes SBM found offensive, I concede that there might be some prim concert-goers who would have found them less than tasteful. But given Angel's extroverted and gregarious personality, they worked well, revealing a welcome human side to this performer whose world-class stature is beyond reproach. Angel's more introverted and staid brother, Pepe, could not have pulled off these anecdotes; Angel used them to interfuse the music (and even more, the composers!) with warmth and personality. My only complaint with Angel's patter was that it often was difficult to hear.

I am not suggesting the evening was without its problems. SBM is right to note that the house personnel mismanaged the lights. She did not note that the audience was unduly noisy with their seats, their

uninhibited tubercular imitations, and they also were very intrusive given the clouds of heavy cigarette smoke during the intermission which wafted (nay; flowed) into the auditorium. Then there was the fact that most of the audience applauded at the end of movements, instead of waiting until the end of an entire piece. This was a distraction (as well as an embarrassment) for serious listeners.

SBM not only is wrong in what she criticizes, she also is askew in what she is quick to praise. For example, while she lamented how Romero and his soprano were not together, or clucked when the soprano supposedly was sharp, it seemed to escape her ears that the piano itself is tuned almost a quarter-note sharp. This is a practice occasionally done in large concert halls when the piano is paired with orchestra, since tuning the piano sharp gives the illusion that it is louder. But this practice is scarcely necessary for a venue as small as the Sheldon, and could only irritate an attentive listener. And lest we forget: What about that PhD at the piano? SBM noted that in the first work—the Vivaldi piece—the pianist and Romero were off during the first movement but then they smoothed out. Well; no they didn't. Romero achieved a supreme state of beneficent resignation while that Bloomington

boy just got worse. By the end his playing was utter travesty. My companion that night is an amateur pianist. She kept giving me horrified looks when the pianist fumbled. At the end, amidst the tepid applause, she voiced indignant criticism which, in my opinion, was much too kind. (This fellow was temporarily relieved of his usual servitude with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra for the sake of helping out with this concert. There are better pianists in Saint Louis. Couldn't one of them have been brought in?)

It wasn't a perfect concert. But Angel Romero was nearly so, Julia Torgovitskaya was just right for this program, the pianist was awful, many in the audience were crude. Doesn't all this deserve a more measured, intelligent, and perceptive review for Saint Louis music lovers?

#### **POSTSCRIPT**

About a week after the concert, I learned some things about that performance which gave me further perspective. Namely, Angel had arrived in Saint Louis with both hands injured (his left thumb cut where it

presses against the guitar's neck; his right index finger cut at one of the joints). He had contacted his two brothers to see if one of them could fill in for him, but they both were already booked for that evening. So he went ahead and gave the concert. This is the reason the Concierto de Aranjuez by Rodrigo (which had a major role for the piano) was substituted in lieu of the "Dance No. 5" from Danzas Españolas, Op. 37 by Granados (as printed on the program). The idea was that this substitution would give the guitarist less responsibility. But it also meant more rehearsal—which was done the afternoon of the evening's concert.

According to more than one person I talked with, this supposedly brief rehearsal time was a valid excuse for why the professor at the piano did not play well. I do not accept this excuse. I have played with pianists who were not yet 20 years old who could have sat down at that score and read it from sight, without needing to rehearse it for themselves—much less with Angel Romero, and done better than Peter Henderson's ataxic hands did. I get sick of hearing excuses made for the bad playing of these academics. It seems that too many of these professor boys are the type who get their jobs without even needing to play well. The main thing they need to know is how to look obsequious while wearing a

black bow tie. (Are you witnessing a prejudice? Of course you are. But in this case it is not irrational. It is thoroughly empirical.) The point being: The fact that Peter Henderson had "only" one afternoon to rehearse with Angel Romero is no excuse for his playing so badly. He played badly because he is an execrably bad piano player. A matter which is not arguable, so there is no need to belabor this dreary topic further. Especially considering the fact that Angel Romero, too, had only one afternoon to rehearse. But his playing, despite being encumbered by two injured hands, was nothing less than world-class.

*(Written: 1-29-2015.)*

*(It deserves being noted that a portion of this article was published in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper in their online "Comments" section on 2-23-2015.)*

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