

# Letter from New York

By JULIA CROWE

PEPE ROMERO performed at the Kaufmann Concert Hall as the final concert for this year's Art of the Guitar Concert Series, run by Artistic Director Benjamin Verdery. Romero, who recorded his first album at the age of 15, has made more than 50 recordings during his career. His most recent releases on the NAXOS label are the *Concierto festivo*, written for him by Ernesto Cordero and the song cycle, *Mi jardín solitario* by Lorenzo Palomo. This past winter, Deutsche Grammophon released *Christmas with Los Romeros*, featuring the Romero brothers performing favourite Christmas tunes. Pepe Romero's new Spanish solo CD, entitled *Spanish Nights* will include a premiere recording of *Suite Madrileña No. 1* composed by Celedonio Romero. The disc is expected to be released this August by Deutsche Grammophon. In 2004, Romero was named Distinguished Artist in Residence at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music. Among other honours, he has been knighted in the Order of 'Isabel la Católica' and the 'Premio Andalucía de Música', the highest recognition given by his native Spain for contribution to the arts. And in 2007, the Romero family received the President's Merit Award from the Recording Academy, producers of the Grammy Awards, for their contributions to music.

For his pre-concert lecture, Artistic Director Benjamin Verdery demonstrated the sounds of a vihuela built by David Rubio since the first half of Romero's concert programme was going to feature vihuela music performed upon the modern classical guitar. Joined onstage by guitarists Jerry Willard and Richard Savino, Verdery was able to help explain this early instrument, which preceded the guitar in history.

Romero's concert repertoire for the evening was a survey of the early history of guitar, spanning four and a half centuries of Spanish and Catalan music performed in chronological order, opening with Luys Milán's *Fantasia No. 16 for Guitar*, published in 1536. Milán was a courtier in Valencia, where he published three books, including the *Libro de musica de viheula de mano intitulado El Maestro* (Book of Music for the *vihuela de mano* entitled, *The Master*) in 1536. This piece was the first printed tablature for the *vihuela*, the Spanish equivalent of the Renaissance lute, though the *vihuela* is much more guitar-like in its physical shape. The largest group of pieces in the book is its 40 fantasias, pieces based on Milán's improvisations on the instrument. Romero performed the 16th of these pieces, which featured fast-moving passages emphasising dexterity and virtuosity. Romero's playing evoked a beautiful tonality to this delicate piece.

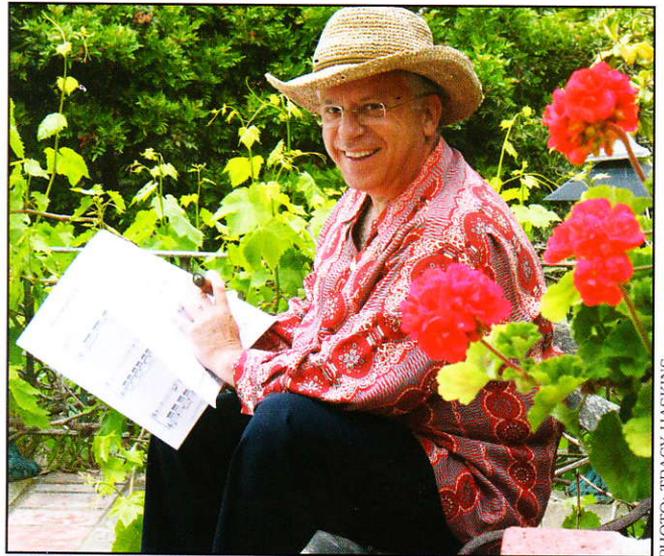


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**Pepe Romero.**

Romero performed his own arrangement of Gaspar Sanz's *Danzas españolas* from *Instrucción de musica sobre la guitarra española* (Spanish dances from the book *Musical Instruction for the Spanish Guitar*.) Sanz was the foremost Spanish guitar master of the 17th century, whose music has enjoyed lasting influence and concert presence. His influential musical primer and collection, entitled *Musical Instruction for the Spanish Guitar*, was first published in Zaragoza in 1674 and 1675 and reissued in 1697 after several editions.

During the century separating Milán from Ganz, the guitar, which was much smaller than the modern guitar and strung with five double courses of strings, began to slowly replace the *vihuela* in popularity. The short and joyful-sounding regional dances that Romero selected from Ganz made for a contrast to the formal, court music of Milán.

Romero leaped ahead by a century in repertoire, performing his arrangement of Fernando Sor's *Introduction, Theme and Variations on a Theme from The Magic Flute for Guitar, Op. 9*, which had been composed in 1820. The concert programme notes state that the most reliable edition of this piece was published in England early in 1821, although a simpler French edition may have preceded it by a year or two. This piece opens in E minor before presenting its theme followed by five variations, with the second recalling the minor mode of the introduction.

Romero closed the first half of his programme with Tárrega's *Capricho árabe* for Guitar, composed in 1889 and the *Gran jota de Aragonesa* for guitar, composed in 1872. Tárrega studied guitar with Julian Arcas in Barcelona before entering the conservatory in Madrid. Tárrega composed over seventy original works for guitar over the course of his

career and performed these pieces for his own concerts throughout Western Europe. *Capricho árabe* evokes the Moorish flavour of southern Spain. Tárrega reworked and expanded a *jota aragonesa*, a hopping style of dance from the eastern province of Aragon, given to him by his teacher Arcas. Romero performed this piece colourfully, inspiring the audience to deliver a standing ovation before intermission.

Pepe Romero opened the second half of his programme enthusiastically with Joaquín Rodrigo's Fandango from *Tres piezas españolas* for guitar, showcasing Romero's *rasqueado* flamenco strumming technique, which requires the right hand a-m-i-p fingers to strum the strings individually in rapid succession. Rodrigo wrote this piece in 1954, and is a composer closely associated with the Romeros for his *Concierto andaluz* for four guitars and orchestra, written for the Romeros in 1967, and the *Concierto madrigal* for two guitars and orchestra in 1968. These *Three Spanish Pieces* had been dedicated to Segovia, and, according to the concert programme, the *Fandango* was the only solo Rodrigo piece that Segovia ever recorded.

Romero performed Federico Moreno Torroba's *Sonatina for Guitar*, composed in 1924. The *Sonatina* is in three movements and is rhythmically rooted in Spanish dance tradition. Romero followed this piece with Joaquín Turina's *Sevillana for Guitar*, Op. 29, composed in 1923. Like Torroba,

Turina was a non-guitarist composer whom Segovia encouraged to write for the guitar. The *Sevillana* is a dark flamenco fantasia, which reinterprets the traditional Andalusian gypsy style. Isaac Albéniz's *Asturias*, *Leyenda from Suite española*, Op. 47 and his *Rumores de la caleta*, *malagueña from Recuerdos de viaje*, both arranged by Romero, are established audience favourites for their postcard evocation of Spain. Romero closed his concert with Celedonio Romero's dazzling *Fantasia Cubana for Guitar*, composed in 1951. Celedonio Romero was born in Cuba and his family returned to Spain before he was a year old. He studied at the Conservatory of Málaga and at the Conservatory of Madrid with Joaquín Turina. After his own three sons were born, the Romero family emigrated to the U.S. in 1957. Celedonio Romero has written more than 100 pieces for the guitar, including ten concertos. The beautiful and optimistic melody of the *Fantasia Cubana* is based on the traditional *guajira* style of music, a form of Cuban country music, which features a mixture of  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $\frac{6}{8}$  rhythms. For an encore, Romero performed Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, recounting to the audience that it was the very piece that his father used to play which made him fall in love with the guitar and even more so when his father took him to see the Alhambra in Spain. 'I saw for myself how a place could become music,' he says.