



Johan Smith

Winner 2019 Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) Competition

J.S. BACH • BRITTEN • MERTZ • PONCE • SCHWIZGEBEL



Johan Smith Guitar Recital

The term 'toccata' is derived from the Italian '*toccare*', 'to touch' and is a work intended as a display of manual dexterity, usually for a solo keyboard instrument. Within the toccata form other styles may be incorporated such as an *adagio* movement and a fugue. J.S. Bach wrote a number of toccatas for organ with a brilliant use of the pedals as well as the keyboard, to which the term 'pedaliter' has been applied. Toccatas for harpsichord, where the array of the organ's pedals are absent, are regarded as 'manualiter', involving manuals only. The original composition was generically intended for *strumento a tastiera* ('keyboard instrument') and the present practice is to consider this work as intended for the harpsichord.

Toccata, BWV 914, taken from a group of seven *Toccatas (BWV 910 to BWV 916)*, thus presents a virtuosic suite in four movements. The transcriber, Stefano Grondona, in an introductory note comments that 'The realisation of *Toccata, BWV 914* that we offer here has matured through several years of concert performances and a recording.' He observes that the process of developing such a transcription 'offers the results of our technical experimentation with guitar music that borders on the unplayable'. Nevertheless it is clear that when performed expertly, *Toccata, BWV 914* in this arrangement sounds most idiomatic to the guitar.

The *Toccata* begins with a quietly understated movement leading to a very intricate contrapuntal movement marked *Un poco allegro*, a double fugue. In one of the early copies of the suite the *Adagio* carries the additional title of *Præludium*. This *Adagio* is a complex work with much detailed filigree. The closing three-part fugue has become mysterious because of the discovery in a Naples manuscript of an anonymous *Fugue* with distinct similarities attributed to Benedetto Marcello. The Bach scholar, David Schulenberg, has commented however that Bach's version is 'more claveristic, somewhat more refined, and at the same time, more complex'.

Manuel Ponce (1882–1948) has been described as the founding father of 20th-century Mexican music. His pupil, Carlos Chávez (1899–1978) said of him: 'It was Ponce who created a real consciousness of the richness of Mexican folk art.' Segovia and Ponce met in Mexico in 1923, and from that time onwards the composer devoted himself to writing many pieces for the guitar, nearly all of them dedicated to Segovia. Of these compositions, which include preludes, suites, a concerto, variations, several sonatas, and works for guitar and harpsichord, Segovia has written: 'Large or small, they are, all of them, pure and beautiful.'

Ponce, born in Fresnillo, Mexico, was also a distinguished concert pianist and conductor as well as a composer. He first learned the piano with his older sister, Josefina. After further studies in Mexico City he travelled to Europe in 1904 where he took composition lessons in Bologna with Enrico Bossi (1861–1925) and Cesare Dall'Olio (1849–1906), who was Puccini's teacher. Later he studied in Berlin with the renowned pianist, Martin Krause (1853–1918), who in 1883 had performed for Liszt. Ponce returned to his homeland in January 1907 and taught the piano at the Conservatorio Nacional de Música in Mexico City. In 1912 he gave a concert of his own music including the first performance of his *Piano Concerto*. During this period he established his credentials as one of the central figures of the rising Mexican 'nationalist' school.

From 1915 to 1917 the composer lived in Cuba during the Mexican Revolution. After returning to Mexico in 1917 he resumed his teaching post at the Conservatorio, and conducted the National Symphony Orchestra, but between 1925 and 1933 he settled in Paris, where he studied with Paul Dukas in the same class as Joaquín Rodrigo. Moving back to Mexico in 1933 he became director of the Conservatorio. As a prolific writer, he published many articles in *Cultura musical*, one of several magazines he founded over his lifetime. During these fruitful years his major works were written and performed.

Diferencias sobre la folía de España y fuga ('Variations on *La folía de España* and Fugue') was composed at Segovia's request following a letter from the guitarist to the composer in December 1929. In the space of a few months Ponce completed a set of 20 variations as well as a fugue and a prelude (not included in Schott's publication in 1932).

Corazón Otero, a foremost Ponce scholar, described the piece as 'one of the monumental works of the guitar'. This extended composition, rare at a time when many guitar works were relatively brief, includes aspects of various guitar techniques used by traditional composers. Thus, Ponce deploys chordal textures, arpeggios, monody, harmonics, tremolo, sustained legato, as well as fugue. Many players have considered this to be one of the most challenging peaks of the repertoire: an Everest to be conquered. The passing of time has not diminished its appeal to modern generations of virtuosic guitarists.

Johann Kaspar Mertz, a virtuoso performer on both guitar and flute, was born in Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia). He moved to Vienna in 1840 and made his concert debut at the Court Theatre of the Empress Carolina Augusta. In subsequent years, Mertz toured Moravia, Poland and Russia, gave concerts in Berlin and Dresden, and also played at the court of Ludwig of Bavaria. Shortly after his death from a heart ailment at the age of 50, Mertz was posthumously awarded First Prize for his composition *Concertino* at the Brussels Guitar Competition of 1856. Mertz performed on various types of guitar, including eight- and ten-stringed instruments, from the 1840s onwards.

His prolific compositions include didactic and easy pieces, concert works, arrangements of Schubert, pieces for two guitars or guitar and piano, and fantasies based on famous operatic themes. Nikolai Makaroff (1810–1890), the eminent Russian guitarist, described his playing as 'marked by force, sweep, sensitivity, precision, expression and assurance' and praised his skill with 'every secret and effect of the guitar'.

Despite his output of over one hundred compositions, Mertz was neglected by guitarists for many decades, a revival of interest in his creative activities being achieved

with Simon Wynberg's ten-volume edition of his works (Chanterelle, 1985). Since that time, his music has become a significant feature of the concert repertoire. *Concertino* is one of Mertz's celebrated virtuosic works. It features brilliant octave patterns, tremolo, and, after the initial *Maestoso*, *Grandioso*, and *Quasi andantino piacevole* sections, concludes with a vigorous *Allegro brillante* and *Presto* finale.

Mertz was posthumously awarded First Prize for his composition *Concertino* in the 1856 Brussels Guitar Composition and Guitar Construction competition organised by Nikola Makaroff (Napoléon Coste came second). It was first published in the West in 1985 in the first volume of Simon Wynberg's collection of the complete Mertz guitar works.

Nocturnal after John Dowland, Op 70 by Benjamin Britten was soon acknowledged as one of the most significant and original compositions in the history of the guitar. Dedicated to Julian Bream, it unites the contemporary world of dissonance and strangeness with the Elizabethan concepts of deep emotion and melancholy. Though written for the guitar, at Julian Bream's request, the work also pays homage to the dedicatee's affinities with the lute of John Dowland whose music Bream took to international audiences, demonstrating its eternal depths, uniqueness, and relevance.

The composition is a set of eight variations with the theme, Dowland's song *Come, heavy Sleep*, appearing at the very end:

*Come, heavy Sleep, the image of true Death,
And close up these my weary weeping eyes,
Whose spring of tears doth stop my vital breath,
And tears my heart with Sorrow's sigh-swoll'n cries.
Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul,
That living dies, till thou on me be stole.*

Nocturnal is an exploration of the many moods of sleep, passing through states of intense agitation and disquiet, leading towards the final statement of melancholy serenity which resolves all tensions.

The work was first performed by Julian Bream at Aldeburgh on 12 June 1964, and recorded soon afterwards, bringing about a virtual re-orientation of customary concepts about the guitar's repertoire and expressive capabilities.

Josquin Schwizgebel, composer and guitarist, after study at the Lausanne Conservatory, was awarded a Master of Pedagogy in classical guitar, in the class of George Vassilev, at the Haute école des arts de Berne. He has produced multiple projects and recordings and performed worldwide. His compositions present immersion in an original universe with poetic reflections. Schwizgebel currently composes regularly and plays with musicians of contrasting styles, ranging from jazz to Baroque music. As a guitarist, he performs with Trio Mérian (two guitars and a violin), playing a wide repertoire.

Sables Stellaires ('Stellar Sands') from *Les Reflets de l'Obscurité* ('Reflections from the Darkness') is an evocative work using a variety of guitar effects to create an atmosphere of mystery and profundity. The work begins with repeated notes and vivid arpeggios, spiced with harmonics, leading on to lyrical episodes and concluding with a dramatic climax. It is in connection to the theme of reflections that Josquin Schwizgebel created *Sables Stellaires* to evoke a journey towards space where worlds are crumbling, with unpredictable echoes and strange shaded images.

The composer has commented: 'What would happen if the darkness emitted reflections? What would be their nature? What textures would they adorn? Would they be colourful, or prominent? Our Universe, redesigned by these mysterious iridescences, would get carried away like a kaleidoscope gone mad, projecting us into a whirlwind of hypnotic sensations.'

Graham Wade

Johan Smith

Winner of numerous international competitions and named as 'Classical Guitar Revelation 2017' by *Guitare Classique* magazine, Johan Smith has been invited to perform as a soloist at renowned festivals, and on international concert tours and radio shows. His particular interest in contemporary music has led him to collaborate with several composers including Josquin Schwizgebel and Arnaud Fillion, who dedicated his *Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra*, created in Budapest in 2019, to the guitarist. Born in 1990 in Geneva, Smith holds postgraduate degrees from the University of Lausanne, where he studied performance with professor Dagoberto Linhares. In addition to his activity as a guitar teacher, he also founded the extreme metal band Stortregn, with whom he has already recorded five albums and toured the world since 2005. Johan Smith plays on Savarez Strings.

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Johan Smith, 2019 winner of the prestigious Guitar Foundation of America Competition, presents his dream programme in this recital. Bach's *Toccat*a for harpsichord 'borders on the unplayable' for the guitar, especially in its final double fugue, while Manuel Ponce's *Variations on La folía de España and Fugue* is one of the most challenging peaks of the repertoire. Mertz's celebrated virtuoso *Concertino* is followed by Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, renowned for its blend of Elizabethan melancholy and contemporary strangeness. The recital concludes with a world premiere, the evocative *Sables Stellaires* by Josquin Schwizgebel, dedicated to Johan Smith.

JOHAN SMITH Guitar Recital

- Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685–1750)
Toccata in E minor, BWV 914 (c. 1710)
(arr. Stefano Grondona, b. 1958) **8:47**
- 1 (Toccat
 - 2 Un poco allegro **0:54**
 - 3 Adagio **1:56**
 - 4 Fuga: Allegro **2:15**
3:42
- Manuel María Ponce** (1882–1948)
5 **Diferencias sobre la folía de España y fuga**
(‘Variations on *La folía de España and Fugue*’) (1929–31) **22:45**
- Johann Kaspar Mertz** (1806–1856)
6 **Guitar Concertino** (1856) **8:00**
- Benjamin Britten** (1913–1976)
7 **Nocturnal after John Dowland, Op. 70** (1963) **16:30**
- Josquin Schwizgebel** (b. 1984)
8 **Les Reflets de l’Obscurité** (‘Reflections from the Darkness’) –
III. Sables Stellaires (‘Stellar Sands’) (2019)* **4:21**

***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

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