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Song of the strings



CLASSIC TOUCH Dennis Azabagic. Photo: R. Ravindran

Denis Azabagic's guitar that melded cultures and compositions struck a chord with listeners

A musician from Bosnia-Herzegovina who lives in the U.S., a repertoire of music that traverses centuries and cultures and an instrument with an inherent passport for crossing genres. All three fused under the mellow arc lights of the Museum Theatre for a Western classical guitar concert organised by Musee Musical and The Madras Guitar Ensemble.

The centre-piece in almost every kind of folk music from the Continent, the lissome lilt in jazz, the svelte soul in blues and the amplified roar in rock, the guitar also has a rich tradition of classical music that harks back to the Baroque. On this weekend evening, the Angel Romero Special Edition guitar from Steve Connor fitted with D'addario strings cast a spell in the hands of Denis Azabagic. This classical guitarist from Bosnia is one of the most compelling on the international circuit, coming into the spotlight when the former Yugoslavia was fading into oblivion, and has over the past 20 years managed to strike a balance as a soloist, chamber musician and soloist with orchestras around the globe. At 20, he was the youngest winner at one of the most prestigious guitar competitions held in Madrid and was labelled one of the greatest guitarists in the world by renowned Spanish composer Anton Garcia Abril.

Azabagic opened his programme with Latin American composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos' "5 Preludes" that merges facets of the classical with conventional Brazilian music. Its rich winding chromatics, lush energy and rhythmic complexities immediately spell out 'Brazilian' and Azabagic's precise rendering ornamented the cross-board trills to give off a rounded, creamy sound.

Next, he chose to play the works of his former teacher, contemporary Bosnian composer and guitarist, Vojislav Ivanovic. His "6 Pieces de Café" run through a gamut of emotions and sounds and Azabagic moved from the lilting 'Funny Valse', to the gentle tinkle of a rippling brook in

'Tango Café', to a dreamy haze in 'Nostalgia', a comforting melody in 'Lullaby' and the memory of whirling dervishes in 'Improvisation and Dance'.

Joaquin Rodrigo's "Invocacion y danza", written by the visually-impaired composer as a tribute to Manuel de Falla does not reflect the happy ethos of sunny Spain, rather it takes on darker hues. Azabagic's fingers moved across the frets like pieces on a chess board. The music began softly with tinkling harmonics but slowly became agitated as it moved through tremolos and repetitive arpeggios. The vivid flamenco beats at times broke into exuberance while retaining a graceful skipping stance.

By now most of the audience were stomping their feet and not only because Azabagic had opened the doors to Andalusian plazas, gypsies and flamenco dancers with his chromatic composition but also because sibilant whispers and screaming cellphones from some of the listeners threw a dark cloud on the concert.

Thankfully it lifted by the time Alan Thomas' "Suite Out of Africa" ushered in the magic of that great, heaving continent. Inspired by Karen von Blixen's best-seller, Thomas has used different strands of African music to paint a picture of rolling meadows, wide veldts and a pace of life untouched by time. Azabagic recreated that magic in 'Call at Sunrise', where he developed the canon into a beautiful vocal melody. The second movement, 'Morning Dance', had a touch of popular South African music. The guitar turned percussion in 'Evening Dance', while 'Cradle Song' drew the suite to a serene close.

Fernando Sor's 'Variations on Mozart's Theme Op: 9' rounded off the concert. Spanish music however mesmerising it may sound on other instruments, invariably sounds the best on the guitar. Azabagic's grand orchestral chords were clear from the opening notes of Sor's work and his plucked solidity and rolling strum evoked the sensuous strut of men in boleros and women in ruffled skirts.

Azabagic's sound technique and use of subtle amplification more than showcased the splendour of the score and the warmth of the guitar's rich timbre. Like in the fable about following your dream, Azabagic opened the doors of imagination to a world of pageantry and passion, inherited patterns of music and primeval sound.