

# TORONTO STAR

MOSTLY CLOUDY. HIGH 15C ★ THURSDAY, MARCH 31, 2005 ★ [thestar.com](http://thestar.com) ★ METRO EDITION

# Guitar in a classical mode

## Review

GEOFF CHAPMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

For some, the omnipresence of the guitar in contemporary music is an aural curse for which there is no apparent cure.

Classical music has largely escaped this, for its guitar repertoire is small. Today only a relative handful of artists have taken up the challenge of making such music available to a mass audience.

One is Daniel Bolshoy, on view Tuesday at Glenn Gould Studio in the last of CBC's OnStage season's chamber series, which will be broadcast May 15.

In the company of mezzo soprano Julie Nesrallah and the popular and youthful Vancouver-based Borealis Quartet, he made a strong case for the appeal of using the acoustic guitar as a significant device for communicating serious musical ideas.

The varied program included works by composers from Spain, Brazil and Italy, with perhaps the most unlikely guitar entry from violin legend Paganini, whose *Sonata concertata* opened proceedings, with Bolshoy accompanied by violinist Patricia Shih of the Borealis gang of four.

It provided a lively to-and-fro in three movements, with deft rather than elegant playing and passion at a premium. Its appeal was eclipsed when the guitarist was joined by Borealis cellist Ariel Barnes for Radames Gnattali's *Sonata* for cello and guitar, a mix of Brazilian folk and classical themes. Barnes' yearning tones decorated an amiable Adagio and freewheeling finale.

Jonathan Culp's setting of five poems by Emily Dickinson would have been fine if you're a devotee of her abrasive commentaries, sad grumblings and minimal charm, and also if you appreciated the powerful impact that Nesrallah's voice brought to the work. To these ears her strident tones made the music chilly and mechanical.

She sounded better on a quintet of songs from 1945 by Spain's Xavier Montsalvatge that are all about Cuba, presciently implicating the damage caused by its colonial heritage. Here her intense singing line, in Spanish, worked, the best elements being a sweet lullaby and a dose of abandoned revelry.

Throughout all this, Bolshoy ably demonstrated an accomplished intelligence and technical skill, and among the best happenings of the night were his solo offerings. The fascinating flourishes he brought out in Mi-

guel Llobet's *Scherzo Vals*, the graceful lilt he insinuated into the *Valses poeticos* of Enrique Granados plus the tellingly expressive nuances he uncovered in Sergio Assad's *Preludio e tocata* were delightful.

Yet they were but splendid trifles when served before savouring the night's highlight, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Quintet* for guitar and string quartet, which he wrote for guitar legend Andres Segovia.

The Borealis foursome — Shih, Barnes, violinist Yuel Yawney and violist Nikita Pogrebnoy — responded intuitively to the work's ebb and flow, with smooth contours but perhaps a slightly limited palette of colours in the first movement. They followed it with a lovely examination of melody and mood, letting the elements unfold with natural ease, while the sparkling Scherzo and rambunctious Rondo came equipped with energy, insight and warmth.

Bolshoy was as vivacious as his colleagues here, but following it with the first part of a five-part song cycle by Ottawa guitarist Roddy Ellias with text by Hamilton's Sandra Nicholls was a mistake. The full work will premiere at Ottawa's chamber festival in August, but this brief trial run seemed out of place.