

Odair Assad brings a veteran's skills to the Guitar Society

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Next year, Odair Assad and his brother Sergio will mark their 50th year of performing as a guitar duo, called, simply enough, The Assads.

Very big names in the world of classical guitar, they've toured the world many times over, worked with some impressive musicians (Yo-Yo Ma, Dawn Upshaw and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg among them), and taken the sounds of their homeland to a host of important names.

On Saturday, though, Odair Assad returned to St. Louis for a solo gig. The Brazilian-born, Brussels-based Assad offered the second recital of the St. Louis Classical Guitar Society's six-concert 2014-15 season.

Compactly built, with a long gray ponytail, Assad demonstrated how a lifetime's intimate familiarity with an instrument can make it appear almost like an extension of the artist's body. He becomes one with the guitar; his playing seemed as natural as conversing or

walking. He has a deceptively casual attitude when he comes on stage, but that attitude is belied by the quality and intensity of his performance.

Assad began by swapping the order of some music on the program, then launched into selections from the “Suite populaire bresilienne” by Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959), beginning with a cheery dance, and demonstrating his skills. Two short works of Agustin Barrios (1885-1944) were smooth, with something to say to the listener.

The first half also offered three pieces by Anibal Sardinha, known as “Garoto” (1915-1955). In his brief, hard-to-decipher spoken notes, Assad called Sardinha the father of the Brazilian style of playing, and this music made a strong case for both the title and the oeuvre, jazzy with a touch of melancholy. Switching moods in an instant, Assad seemed at one with the music.

The second half included two pieces dedicated to Assad, including the impressive, challenging “Sonata del Caminate” from 2007, by Leo Brouwer (b. 1939). Complex and a little spiky in places, it provided the guitarist with the opportunity for a tour de force. Its four movements were played without a pause; he changed tunings without missing a beat, and delivered what Brouwer promised.

The sonata provided a solid testimony (if any were needed) to Assad’s chops, as well as a solid conclusion to his recital. He took his leave with a brief, lovely encore, “Waltz,” by Antonio Lauro.

Sarah Bryan Miller is the Post-Dispatch's classical music critic. Follow Bryan on the Culture Club blog, and on Twitter at @SBMillerMusic.

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