

## Guitarist Jason Vieaux in Philadelphia

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### Classical guitarist, with soprano as guest

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Jason Vieaux isn't the sort of guitarist who needs guest artists in order to present an engaging recital. Even so, this frequent visitor, presented Sunday by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, had the young soprano Sarah Shafer for performances of John Dowland songs and Benjamin Britten folk music arrangements that became charming interludes between more challenging works.

Overall, the recital explored the fascination that 20th-century Britten had with the melancholic 16th-century Dowland. Four of Dowland's more popular songs, with Shafer's youthful voice accentuating the music's straightforwardness, laid the foundation for Britten's cerebral 1963 *Nocturnal After John Dowland*, which the composer himself admitted was rather remote. The theme and variations format is backward: The theme arrives at the end of eight variations that are so far flung you aren't sure they belong in the same piece.

Vieaux brought great concentration to passages of typically Brittenesque sparseness that can feel threadbare in a lesser performance. Particularly powerful was the "Passacaglia" movement, whose recurring chords can feel obsessive if not constantly varied, as they were by Vieaux.

The other modern work was Dan Visconti's 2010 *Devil's Strum*, a descriptive work about making deals with the devil, the supernatural qualities underscored by extended techniques that had Vieaux playing the strings high on the neck around the tuning pegs.

Few guitarists stray far from the Bach lute suites, represented here by the *Suite in E minor* that ended Vieaux's program, his slim, fat-free, forthright sound being a clear vehicle for his artistic intentions. His playing has conceptual solidity with his tempo relationships. Instead of constantly beautifying the musical surfaces, he uses vibrato and color for interpretive points when most demanded, and with particularly arresting effect, in part because your ears don't take them for granted.

In works written for lute, I did miss the older instrument's sound and faster rate of decay, which lends vulnerability to the Dowland lute songs and, in Bach, keeps the rhythm from becoming heavy-handed. But considering the scarcity of lutenists, the Dowland/Bach repertoire would be heard even less were it not for guitarists such as Jason Vieaux.

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