

# CLASSICAL GUITAR

## Jason Vieaux and His Broad Spectrum Approach to Classical Guitar

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By Mark Small



It's futile to attempt to pigeonhole the musical proclivities of Grammy winner Jason Vieaux. Among the world's most prominent Gen-X classical guitarists, he has embarked on a musical adventure that includes deep excursions into the classical literature juxtaposed with serious expeditions into pop, jazz, and other musical tributaries. No matter what he plays, the music is always brimming with spirit, insight, and reverence for the genre du jour.

Vieaux is in high demand as a recitalist and soloist with orchestras, but perhaps what distinguishes him from many other classical guitarists is his commitment to chamber music.

Over the past decade, he has done recording and concert work with three ensembles: duo settings with harpist Yolanda Kondonassis and accordion and bandoneon player Julien Labro, and explorations of old and new guitar quintet literature with the Escher String Quartet. Recently, Vieaux has added performances of violin-and-guitar duets with Anne Akiko Meyers and Kristin Lee to the mix. The diverse instrumentation and repertoire for his chamber and other projects enables Vieaux to present his audience with a wide array of musical vistas.

### A Passel of New Albums

Three new recordings showcase Vieaux's contrasting collaborations and reveal his capacity to master a huge volume of music and deliver it at the highest artistic standard. The albums include the premiere recording of Jonathan Leshnoff's Guitar Concerto, Infusion with Julien Labro, and Dance with the Escher Quartet. Soon to follow is a solo recording of J.S. Bach violin sonatas No. 1, No. 3, and Partita No. 3.

Vieaux's musical journey began in his hometown of Buffalo, New York, when he was five years old. "My mother bought me a classical guitar without realizing that it was a classical guitar," he says. "I started knocking around, playing by ear until the Buffalo Guitar Quartet played at my school. My mother worked at the school and approached the quartet saying that her son had the same type of guitar." That led to lessons with Jeremy Sparks, a founding member of the group.

"So, I started out playing classical guitar, which was a little unusual then," Vieaux says. "Today, kids around the world are starting with classical guitar because conservatory and educational systems are in place. There are also Suzuki and Childbloom programs in many communities."

Formative influences flowed from his parents' albums. "My mother's collection had records by the Beatles and Motown R&B and soul," he recalls. "My father's collection was almost entirely jazz. My brother and I were listening to rock, pop, metal, and hip-hop. I loved all kinds of music."

Sparks helped him build a solid technical foundation with entry-level repertoire and, later, the etudes of Fernando Sor. Sparks also had him playing single-line melodies from flatpicking books by Happy Traum. “I learned about ensemble playing with Jeremy during my lessons; it was an early part of my training. In addition to my solo pieces I had to prepare duo pieces.”

After high school, Vieaux enrolled at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied with John Holmquist. Combining what he had gleaned from his teachers about practicing and the mechanics of guitar technique with masterclasses with David Russell added to his comprehension. “It all made sense,” he says. “I knew what I had to do to craft a better golf swing—if you will. At the Cleveland Institute of Music, I worked for a very long time on technique.” In 1992, while a college junior, he won first prize in the Guitar Foundation of America competition. Recital bookings in America and France, part of the prize, gave him a taste for touring. “I took to the road right away,” he says. “I knew then that this life was for me.”

### Jubilance for Jamming

Another important component of Vieaux’s playing is that he is a facile improviser, but he’s modest about his abilities. “I don’t improvise on the level of a professional jazz musician; I have to craft my solos a bit,” he says. “I invested most of my time in classical repertoire. But when I was in college, I played a lot with [violinist] Evan Price, who was two doors down from me in the dorm. He taught me how to read lead sheets and comp. We formed a trio with a drummer and played standards and Celtic music. I also started writing tunes for that band.”

He credits that experience with equipping him for later work with Julien Labro. The two met about a decade ago when Labro was playing with a group called Hot Club of Detroit at Nighttown, one of Cleveland’s top jazz clubs. “Julien was blowing the roof off the place with his solos,” Vieaux remembers. “I told him I was looking for a bandoneon player to do the Concerto for Bandoneon and Guitar by Astor Piazzolla. We had a similar outlook on music and kept in touch.” Ultimately, Labro arranged the piece for guitar, bandoneon, string quartet, and double bass, and they performed it along with some duets. “After we had created a program, I had something to offer my management so that we could play other concerts together.”

For their ambitious Infusion collaboration, Vieaux and Labro arranged multi-movement pieces by Leo Brouwer (Tres Danzas Concertantes) and Radamés Gnattali (Suite Retratos) as well as Piazzolla’s Escuela, Pat Metheny’s Antonia, and the pop hit “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears. They are joined in the Gnattali by double bassist Peter Dominguez and longtime Paul Simon percussionist Jamey Haddad. On the album, Labro and Vieaux blend written parts with probing improvisations, give nods to R&B, and even work in quotes from Bob Marley and Beyoncé tunes in the Piazzolla. The disc ends after a raucous jam on the Tears for Fears song.

The Leshnoff Concerto for Guitar is at the other end of the musical spectrum. It features Vieaux as soloist with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra conducted by Giancarlo Guerrero. “The concerto had been written for and was premiered by Manuel Barrueco,” Vieaux says. “He had worked with Leshnoff on the guitar part. This album was a live recording and the piece is difficult. It’s on the level with [Joaquín Rodrigo’s famous] Concierto de Aranjuez. I put a lot of time into preparing it because it was to be a live performance. It was a bit of pressure to make sure it made the cut.”

Leshnoff’s piece is satisfyingly tonal with brilliant orchestration. The opening movement features the guitar in lightning-fast scales and bristling arpeggios and requires razor-sharp ensemble work in the concerted passages. The middle movement has the feel of a meditation, with the orchestra reduced to just strings, harp, and guitar. The final movement includes rhythmic chord jabs, subtle dialogs with woodwinds, and some brash strumming toward the end. Vieaux shines throughout the 25-minute piece.

“Radio stations are playing the recording and I am hoping to get more performances of this work,” he says. “It’s top-drawer in my opinion.” Vieaux is slated to perform it again with the Albuquerque Symphony in January 2020.

Dance, a collaboration by Vieaux and the Escher Quartet, opens with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s ravishing Guitar Quintet Op. 143, followed by Aaron Jay Kernis’ frolicsome 100 Greatest Dance Hits and Luigi Boccherini’s Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D Major, which ends with a distinctive Fandango popularized by Julian Bream.

Each work contains four movements, and represents attractive repertoire drawn from the 18th and 20th centuries. The Tedesco, premiered by Segovia in 1951, offers the Italian composer’s trademark lyrical themes and wandering harmonies. Vieaux handles its fast-changing chords and stutter-note passages in the more energetic movements with ease. The group members are simpatico in the rhythmically vibrant Finale.

Of 100 Greatest Dance Hits, Vieaux says, “The Kernis is an extremely difficult piece to put together and perform. Kernis has been one of America’s most revered composers for the past 30 years. As a guitarist, I am grateful when composers of that skill level are writing for our instrument.” The work was commissioned by the legendary violinist and teacher Ida Kavafian in 1992, and David Tanenbaum was the soloist. At last summer’s chamber music festival, Music from Angel Fire in New Mexico, Vieaux performed it with a quartet that included Kavafian. “She said she’d always wanted to play the piece again,” he says. “This was the first time Ida had done it since the premiere. It was kind of a nice full circle for the piece.”

### Joy in Every Sound

All three recordings possess an ebullience that Vieaux attributes to the friendship among the musicians with whom he works. “When you are doing solo concerts and concertos, you are in hotel rooms by yourself,” he reflects. “So the social aspect of these collaborations is really great. If someone hears something in the musical rapport, I think a lot of it comes from the players being good friends.”

In addition to the ensemble recordings, Vieaux is poised to release a solo album of J.S. Bach’s music. “I am excited about this one more than any solo record I’ve put out,” he says. “I’m hoping people will hear that there has been some growth since the last Bach album I recorded.” The new record will contain the first violin sonata in G minor, third violin sonata in C major (BWV 1005), and Partita No. 6 (BWV 1006), also known as the fourth lute suite.

Vieaux plays the first violin sonata (BWV 1001) in the original key of G minor, rather than A minor as most guitarists do. “I was inspired by seeing Barrueco play it in that key,” Vieaux says. “I thought it sounded great playing a large-scale work of that quality in G minor. I’ve been playing my own edition of it since 1999. It was my Bach piece for five or six years. When I came back to it, I saw a lot of new things I could do with fingerings and retooled the fugue and presto. I feel like my Bach playing is looser now; I’m more relaxed and comfortable with this music.”

Keeping all this material under his fingers is a huge task. “I play about eight or nine hours of repertoire per year,” he says. “It takes a lot of planning to keep everything up. If I can get in two to three hours of practice a day, that’s great. I’m pretty good at looking at a score and pinpointing the number of work hours it will take for me to learn it. I know day-to-day what I am going to work on. For better or worse, my life is scheduled to the hour—that includes time with my family.”

Vieaux married in 2013, and he and his wife had a son in 2014 and a daughter in 2016. “I didn’t realize how much I was going to miss my family when I went away. Having a home life changed me as a person. I think it has probably made my playing better in some ways.”

In addition to concertizing, Vieaux teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, and online through the Jason Vieaux Classical Guitar School. He's very upbeat about young players. "I feel that the guitar is in a golden age. The core of young people that play well is much larger today. The future of the guitar is in good hands."

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