

Bitetti delights audience

by Rick Collins

When Bitetti casually sauntered on stage that Saturday evening of the fifth, one was immediately struck with the setting complementing the performance-to-be. Adorned with merely a rectangular leather stool, an adjustable

footbrace, and a music stand complete with a few loose sheets of music, the stage, devoid of microphones or sound equipment, took on an aesthetically Spartan demeanour, suddenly graced by the presence of the tall, slender Argentine bearing a solitary acoustic

guitar.

With a deep bow and a muted word of thanks, Ernesto Bitetti sat down and completed a preliminary tuning of his instrument before launching into a selection written by Isaac Albeniz, entitled "Asturias". His treatment of the number was technically proficient, but somewhat stiff and formal, and didn't do much to fire the enthusiasm of the audience right off the bat. His "Mallorca" came into its own with considerable verve, and by the time he began Turina's "Hommage to Tarrega Garrocin-Soleares", he had established as definite a rapport with his listeners as might have been humanly possible. This was probably the best piece throughout the first set, and as Bitetti's playing gained in momentum from intricate chord structure at the outset to fast and fiery flurries of wild flamenco picking towards the finale, one might have been struck with the notion that

opportunity of further dazzling the crowd with the intricate stylizing and elaborate finger work necessary to do justice to that particular selection. Falu's "Malambo" was somewhat of an emotional letdown, and its tedious pace did little to augment the rising spirit set by the previous Villa-Lobos piece. A lively dance step in the form of Piazzola's "Tango" rewarded our patience, however, and as Bitetti worked it over with an obvious relish, one could almost envision a mounted horde of gauchos on the Argentine pampas twirling their bolas in time to the pulsating rhythmic strummings of the guitar. "Danza Caracteristica" followed hard on the heels of the tango, invoking a similar sense of timing and rapid fire picking, to bring the second set to a swift conclusion.

Bowing his way clear of the stage, Bitetti again emerged to offer up a surprisingly diversified encore number. It comprised segments of Japanese folk music entitled "The Cherry Blossom", and the audience gained its first real insight into the versatility of the artist. Fingering the guitar in such a manner



There was more than one instrument playing. Indeed, the dexterity of the artist and the range of sounds could have almost suggested a complete string quartet. Incidentally, Bitetti kept up a steady percussive rhythm beat during the selection by rapping the fingerboard of the guitar with his already overworked digits.

Manuel de Falla's "Hommage to Debussy", a much shorter piece by contrast, served to illuminate Bitetti's romantic leanings, as he interpreted the tribute in a rather emotional and somehow subdued light. "Sonata Moreno" and "Paisje Grana" brought back the instrumental flash and showmanship of the first tribute, with the latter ending in a snappy series of chords designed to draw delighted applause from even the most conservative members of the audience. With a couple of modest bows and a wave to the mass, the guitarist strode off stage before the lull of the ensuing intermission.

As a matter of interest, Ernesto Bitetti taught as a music professor in his native Argentina at the ripe old age of twenty, where he also studied conducting, choral music, piano and flute. Touring annually, he appeared with the St. Louis Symphony in 1974, and premiered the "Concierto para la Guitarra Criola" by the famous Waldo de los Rios, a contemporary composer and recording artist who wrote considerable material for Bitetti. Critics have often deemed it fitting that the Argentine be termed the 'heir to Segovia'.

Bitetti's return to the waiting throng brought a rendition of a Hector Villa-Lobos classic, "Preludes I, V, III, IV, and II" which furnished him the

as to emulate the light, harmonious twanging of Japanese string instruments, Bitetti added a whole new dimension to his sound that night. One wouldn't have thought it feasible, but Ernesto Bitetti transported the listener from the plains of Argentina and the sunny climes of Spain to the foothills of Mount Fujiyama in one fell swoop. It was at this point that one appreciative voice at the back of the crowd bellowed out, "You're fantastic!" As the applause subsided, Bitetti looked up smilingly and answered, "You, too!", to bring the house down in yet another burst of clapping.

His propensity to gratify the audience undiminished, Bitetti returned for a final encore number, another Argentine dance melody, which he carried out with his now familiar enthusiasm and élan. By this time the crowd was on its feet, and Bitetti received as good a send-off as any ever witnessed at the Cohn.

It seems that Haligonians are developing quite a passion for flamenco guitar music, as it was only a few months ago that Carlos Montoya graced the stage with a similar performance. Whereas Montoya played to a packed house, Bitetti's audience was definitely smaller, but of a more appreciative nature. There were differences in the style of both musicians, of course. Montoya, a much older man, had the greater experience of the two, but Bitetti is younger and certainly more aggressive in his delivery. In any case, both musicians were exceedingly popular, and the general indication of feeling would seem to favour a return of either, or yet another importation of the talent that was hitherto alien to these shores.

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