

A Family Affair: The Romeros Celebrate 55 Years as a Preeminent Musical Force

By: Jeffrey Kaliss
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Can it be that a family that plays together more securely stays together?

The Romeros began in 1960 when Celedonio Romero, a student of Spanish composer Joaquín Turina, emigrated from Madrid to San Diego County and decided to form a unique ensemble of four guitars: his three sons Celin, Pepe, and Angel, and himself. The quartet rearranged pieces from the Spanish and western classical repertoire, attracted commissions from Joaquin Rodrigo, Morton Gould, and others, and composed some of their own. To date, and with personnel changes, the Romeros have toured and recorded together, and stayed that way through 55 years and three generations.

The lineup heard on December 6, 2014 at the acoustically friendly Miner Auditorium of the SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco included Celin and Pepe from the original quartet; Angel's son Lito, who replaced his late grandfather, Celedonio; and Celin's son Celino, who replaced Angel, now concertizing as a soloist.

The evening's first piece, drawn from "La revoltosa", a turn-of-the century zarzuela by Ruperto Chapí, invoked the dance-based joy of much Spanish-guitar music and showcased the Romeros' deployment of harmonization and trading of solo statements. In an interview later, Pepe told me, "If you compare us to a string quartet, I would be the first violin, Celino would be the second violin, my nephew Lito would be the viola, and Celin would be the cello."

Pepe, for whom the current tour is billed as a celebration of his 70th birthday, then took the stage on his own. His performance of his father's "Los Maestros" showcased the marvelously clean, dry sound of his instrument, manufactured by his son, Pepe, Jr. (Pepe Sr.'s guitar is Junior's No. 230; Lito and Celino play their cousin's Nos. 31 and 202, respectively; and Celin plays a Miguel Rodriguez "Centenario.") Pepe's virtuosity in tremolos and rapid runs, apparent on recordings, was all the more stunning in live performance. Both he and the rest of the ensemble seemed less interested in wide-ranging dynamics. But on "Fantasia Sevillana," written by his father's teacher Turina, the contemplative approach worked well, articulated through altered chords and exploration of both high and low ends of the instrument's range.

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Pepe was joined by Celino on his slightly smaller instrument for Rodrigo's "Tonadilla," originally written for the mid century guitar duo of Ida Presti and Alexandre Lagoya. Uncle and nephew shared the fascinating close intervals that begin the piece, flowing into impressionistic takes on a variety of Iberian modes. In the chamber-music like exchanges, the pair's synchronization was impressive, and their pleasure in the process was apparent on their faces.

As the other half of the quartet returned to the stage, Celino, as genial spokesman, professed, "It's nice to be back in San Francisco, even though we're from San Diego and you took Bruce Bochy" (in reference to baseball World Series-winning manager of the San Francisco's Giants, formerly assigned to San Diego's Padres team). In two sections from Boccherini's Guitar Quintet No. 4 (arranged for quartet by Pepe), there was yet more evidence of tight timing, although the Romeros do not choose to cleave to anything like Baroque rigidity of tempo, either separately or in ensemble. The Iberian influence on the 18th century Italian composer was evident, and the ensemble made ample use of castanet-like percussion on various parts of their instruments.

Two Manuel de Falla pieces by the full quartet followed intermission, an excerpt from The Three Cornered Hat ballet and an adapted zarzuela, "La Vida Breve," both deliciously arranged by Pepe. The flamenco dynamics from the first were affecting, if not always completely defined. On the second, Pepe's playing was particularly lyrical, and he got to interject a bit of palmas (flamenco clapping). Introducing his solo performance of "La Paloma," as arranged by Francisco Tárrega, Celino recalled how he and his seven cousins had stayed as children at Celedonio's home in San Diego County, where he'd learned to play the song—a favorite of his grandfather—to serenade the old man into sleep. Celino's sound evoked this scene, warm and honeyed, and his pacing was engagingly varied, encouraging the rest of us to hear the familiar piece anew. He then set himself to Celedonio's "Fantasia Cubana," a wonderful cantabile tune evoking the composer's expatriate childhood. Celino got to demonstrate his own dynamic range and rapid arpeggios, as well as an affecting strumming on the fingerboard. He'd tuned his sixth string to D for both these numbers.

He was followed by his 78-year-old father Celin, in two preludios by Brazilian master Heitor Villa-Lobos. Both evoked Bach in harmonic structure, but with some amount of soul and swing added by the composer and the player. Celin, never as prominently featured as his younger brother, displayed an airy and empathetic approach, and with nice phrasing. His son and nephew followed him with an arrangement by his brother of the "Danza No. 5" by Enrique Granados. Lito provided symbiotic support to his cousin's affecting, delicate intonation, conveying the rather unusual voicings set by Pepe.

Pepe then introduced the full quartet's versions of a couple of his own compositions. He recalled how Tárrega's "Recuerdos de la Alhambra" had come to life for him as a child when he'd spent time in Granada across from the storied palace, and how this memory had inspired his "En el Sacromonte," a modernistic etude with altered intervals but evoking flamenco roots. Pepe's "Colombianas" offered bouqueted harmonies from the four guitars, and its blithe good-naturedness somehow evoked Hawaiian slack-key and visible family fun, eliciting shouts, whistles, and a standing ovation from the audience.

This was a hard act to follow, but Jerónimo Gimenez's "La boda de Luis Alonso" showcased the quartet in perhaps a more traditional, sophisticated mode, with elegantly stacked harmonies and an elongated presto outing by Pepe. Lito worked his instrument's percussive potential with powerful strumming and pull-offs.

For their first encore, the Romeros used their founder's "La noche en Malaga," described by Pepe as "the first guitar quartet we ever played, and the first composition my father wrote for my mother—when he was 15." Celin and Celino shared an affecting melody line in a familiar Malagueñan progression. Pepe displayed the magic of left-hand pizzicatti, effectively mimicked, but with canny alteration (to the amusement of the audience), by his nephew Lito. The departing ensemble was brought back for a stunning set of improvisations, perhaps the Miner Auditorium's closest approach to the feeling of a Spanish flamenco bar, with Pepe capoed high up on the fingerboard, Celino strumming passionately, and everyone extending their instruments to their acoustic extremes, including much tapping of the wood.

The Romeros managed once again to make family values sound stirring, hugging each other as they left the stage and tossing kisses to their grateful fans.