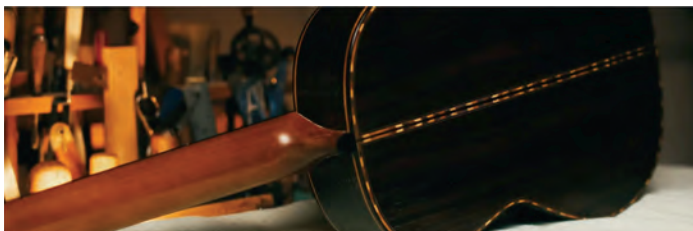


## A TRIBUTE TO ARTISTRY, AND ODE TO FRIENDSHIP

By Mark Small

*Medio Siglo*, the new album by Antigoni Goni, is a glowing tribute to both legendary Spanish luthier, teacher, and researcher José Romanillos and the sound of Spanish guitar that has been at the heart of Goni's artistry since she first encountered a Romanillos instrument. The album title derives from the name of the guitar that Romanillos and his wife Marian built together to commemorate their fiftieth wedding anniversary (*Medio Siglo* translates as "Half Century" in Spanish). José Romanillos, who died in February 2022, considered "La Medio Siglo"—the final guitar he built—to be the best he ever made. That's quite an assessment from the maker who produced more than 350 highly prized instruments, including the 1973 model with which Julian Bream recorded timeless albums.

On *Medio Siglo*, Goni plays ten solos, two duets, and a trio with two of her former students using the last four guitars Romanillos built. The luthier preferred to name his instruments after people and life events rather than number them. In addition to "La Medio Siglo," the quartet of instruments included "La Rosa," built in memory of Romanillos's late, younger sister Rosa; "La Amistad" (the Friendship), completed during a 2005 summer lutherie course Romanillos taught and signed by all class participants; and "Marian," the guitar he built in 2006 honoring his wife, Marian.



La Medio Sigla.

"This album is a tribute to the man and his work and to a sound that I've dedicated my life to," Goni told me in a Zoom call from Greece. "It's the sound of the guitar that I fell in love with and continue to be in love with. It's where I find inspiration in the practice room and what I try to communicate to my students." The

sound of these quintessentially Spanish guitars, José's innate artistic nature, and the close thirty-three-year friendship Goni enjoyed with the Romanillos family were the impetus for the project.

### Fitting repertoire

Witnessing Goni's enraptured response to playing "La Medio Siglo" for the first time in 2017, Romanillos asked her to return and play it a few months later at a concert celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday. In the documentary film chronicling the *Medio Siglo* project ([youtube.com/watch?v=MCbmHc7EhI0](https://youtube.com/watch?v=MCbmHc7EhI0)), Goni shared that following the concert, she sat around a table with the José, Marian, and others in the garden of the Romanillos home in Guijosa, Spain. Completely mesmerized by the guitar's sound, she couldn't put it down. That's when the idea of a recording documenting the sound of the final four instruments Romanillos built was hatched. The plan was for it to be a musical gift celebrating his ninetieth birthday in 2022.

Goni discussed with José and Marian details about what repertoire to feature, whom the artistic team should comprise, choice of recording engineer, and venue for the sessions. The discussions stretched through the intervening years in phone calls and in-person visits. As for the repertoire, it was a foregone conclusion that the music would come from José's favorite Spanish composers. He loved the set of Tárrega miniatures Goni played at his eighty-fifth birthday concert and how she rendered the composer's musical poignancy, wit, and characteristic articulations. So Tárrega was in.

"José liked to hear this music on his guitars," Goni says. "When I asked him about other pieces, he mentioned Llobet's *El testament de n'Amelia* and *La Maja de Goya* by Granados. It was natural for me to create a group of pieces around them and not just do them by themselves." They settled on music exclusively by Tárrega, Llobet, and Granados.

Goni's solo tracks include Tárrega's *Pavana*, *Marieta*, *Alborada*, and *Rosita*, five selections from Llobet's Catalan folk song arrangements, and his transcription of Enrique Granados's *La Maja de Goya*. The latter was one Goni approached with trepidation. "I put off learning it for two years feeling that no one could play it better than Julian Bream did," she says. "I wondered what I could bring to the piece that had not been brought by him." Ultimately, her burnished rendition showcases her musical personality throughout with resonant pizzicato passages and an expressive treatment of the melody. She adds the right amount of rubato and vibrato and timbre changes that plumb the deep well of colors residing in the "Marian" guitar.

In total, more than twenty-eight minutes of the album's program is devoted to the music of Granados. In addition to *La Maja de Goya*, the Spanish nationalist's romantic *Danza española no. 2 "Orientale"* and stately *Danza española no. 6 "Rondalla Aragonesa"* are heard in guitar duo arrangements in which Goni is joined by her former student Maarten Vandembenden. A second former student, Luca Isolani, joins the duo in Vandembenden's dazzling guitar trio arrangement of Granados's *Valses poéticos*, which spans the album's final fourteen minutes. (The group is officially known as The Volterra Project Trio.)



The Volterra Project Trio.

Goni and company gave much thought to which of the four instruments was best suited to each of her solos and for the ensemble selections. The three guitarists considered not only the music at hand but each player. "It was like a sextet," Goni says. "The response of both the player and the guitar was very important." She thought of it as chamber music where the voice of the guitar was as crucial to the musical result as the voice of the player. Goni shared a glimpse of the rationale behind the matching process in the album's liner notes:

The dry, earthy sound of cypress with its clarity and brilliant, sparkling trebles made "Marian" the obvious choice for [José's] all-time favourite "La Maja de Goya," as well as both the high voice of the "Rondalla Aragonesa" and the first guitar in *Valses poéticos*. The rich and majestic "La Medio Siglo" found its perfect match with pieces that required a full, unified sound with long sustain such as "Canço del lladre" and the slow and sad "Marieta." "Rosa's" full and opulent trebles were simply ideal for the first guitar in Granados's "Oriental" and for Tárrega's characterful "Rosita," while the clear and very human voice of "Amistad" made her the best candidate for (amongst others) "El testament de n'Amelia", José's second-favorite piece.

### Bookends to a friendship

In her first post-pandemic trip to Guijosa in January of 2022, Goni visited the Romanillos home and played Tárrega and Llobet for José and Marian while their son Ignacio served up sweet tea with honeyed rice and cinnamon. It was a warm reunion, a bookend to the friendship that began while Goni was a young student at London's Royal Academy of Music in 1989. Her teacher, John Mills, chose her to be the recipient of the academy's newly acquired Romanillos guitar (dubbed "La Boda"), a loaner for a promising student needing a quality instrument. One winter day a short time later, to Goni's horror, the guitar cracked as she played in a practice room filled with dry heat and devoid of humidity. Mills and Goni drove from London to Semely to bring the guitar to Romanillos's workshop. José repaired the crack and a new friendship began. In the decades that have since passed, José and Marian came to regard Goni like a member of their family.

Goni ultimately bought "La Boda" and the instrument helped to define her musical voice. "Your instrument is a partner in life and art, and there is a constant dialog that defines how you shape a phrase and your articulations," she opines. She has played "La Boda" on all but a few of her many albums.

The Sunday afternoon in Guijosa in January of 2022 would be Goni's last visit with José. "I had been there for five days and had a flight home that afternoon," she recalls. "I called Marian the next day to let her know I'd gotten home safely. Marian told me José had fallen after I left and broken his hip. They took him to the hospital where he had surgery, but a week later he passed away." It was a shock to Goni. The recording sessions were slated to begin at the end of February, but she was now hesitant about the project, a gift for the ninetieth birthday José would not see. "He was to be there when we rehearsed in his living room and

would be part of it, experiencing the guitars playing together,” she confides. “We thought he would be in the theater while we recorded. It just didn’t feel right to go on so soon after he passed. I spoke with Marian on the phone after the funeral and she asked what our plans were.”

In the album’s liner notes, Goni shares the words Marian used to inspire her to complete the project with a new *raison d’être*. Goni writes:

It was Marian who encouraged us to go on with it in these words: “Our walk was his last one. Your photos, the last we have of him, and your music the last he ever heard.” And it was at her suggestion that we transformed the project from the original birthday present into “the right tribute for José.” A tribute to the art and sound of José Luis Romanillos, the master luthier. A tribute to a man who devoted his life to the pursuit of the Spanish guitar sound. A small contribution to keeping his legacy alive, and a reminder to young guitarists of the complexity, beauty, and chromatic richness of our instrument that has never, over so many generations, lost its power to touch the heart.



Antigoni Goni and José Romanillos.

### 360-degree artistic tribute

With renewed energy, Goni, Vandembenden, and Isolani tracked the album in late June 2022 at Teatro El Posito in Sigüenza, Spain, with veteran British recording engineer John Taylor. Goni felt strongly that the project be released on vinyl. “I feel the most human sound is vinyl, but the media itself is imperfect, which makes it more human than a perfect digital recording,” she states. “No one really listens to CDs anymore, so the album would have just been a digital

download that people would listen to on their phone or computer. I wanted this to be an all-around artistic tribute to José. His craftsmanship was spectacular—the way he chose the woods, the rosette, the ornamentation—there was 360 degrees of art involved in his craft. I wanted this tribute to be something people could hold in their hands, something they would spend time with.”

For Goni, each recording in her catalog represents more than a musical performance. Each is based on a concept or idea, but most importantly, a feeling. She labored daily for two years to bring this project to fruition. “Apart from being an homage to a very special man and an ode to friendship, *Medio Siglo* is also the culmination of a reflection on sound that has been maturing in me for over thirty years now,” Goni declares. “The fact that I can hold the album in my hands now seems somewhat miraculous.”

Goni thanks those who assisted her, deeming them “a dedicated and inspired group of amazing human beings who believed in the impossible.” Marian Romanillos and daughters Ariadni and Dafni receive appreciation for giving personal support. For their integral artistic input, she thanks engineer John Taylor and his wife Judy as well as her fellow performers Vandembenden and Isolani. The liner notes also express appreciation to video artist Cedric Honings, who documented the odyssey; luthier Gerhard Oldiges, who helped keep the instruments playing well; and graphic artist Katerina Drakaki, who created the design for the lovely album packaging. Also supplying crucial help was Goni’s husband, Michele Rosa-Clot, who wrote grant proposals that brought the Augustine Foundation and corporate sponsors onboard.

“Everyone donated their services to the project,” she observes. “To have a group of people brought together by the same passion and conviction that this was something worth doing is one of those things that doesn’t happen very often.”

Visit [www.medio-siglo.com](http://www.medio-siglo.com) for further details.