

CLASSICAL GUITAR

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Miami International GuitArt Festival 2016 Offered Diverse Program of Modern and Classic Works



May 31, 2016



By **Sam Desmet**

The Florida International University School of Music presented the inaugural edition of [Miami International GuitART Festival](#) from February 24-28, 2016. Guitarist and composer [Mesut Özgen](#), director of guitar studies at FIU, founded the festival as the next step of what he originally started as the FIU GuitART Series back in 2013 with separate concerts and master classes throughout the season.

A welcoming reception set the mood right for the opening concert of the evening, featuring Özgen joined by Peruvian guitarist [Celso Cano](#) and soprano Rebecca Benitez. The exquisite performances of Turkish, Latin, and Spanish music clearly reflected the multicultural environment of Miami.

For many, Grammy-winner [John Schneider](#)'s appearance at the festival's Thursday-morning session served as an introduction to the concept of "just intonation"—a tuning approach based on the intervals of harmonic series. Schneider's National resonator guitar, "switchboard" guitar, and guitars with adjustable frets or fixed tunings create interesting possibilities beyond traditional guitar music, as reflected in works by Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, and Peter Yates. Many of these seem to be based on one scale and one key or are rather simple in form and material. The program concluded with Harry Partch's song cycle *Barstow*, in which Schneider demonstrated himself to be an excellent singer, as well. (Schneider is featured in the

[Summer 2016](#) issue of *Classical Guitar*.)

On Thursday evening, we heard a selection of Felix Mendelsohn's contrapuntal "Music Without Words," which seemed to fit the guitar quite well. These excellent transcriptions, combined with original compositions by performer Stephen Aron, formed a balanced, well thought-through program. The master class the following day once more confirmed the musical skills of this refined artist.

You know you're in for a spectacle if Ben Verdery is on the program, and this concert was no different. The improvisational and minimalistic piece "Prelude and Wedding Dance," written by the performer, opened doors to an anything-but-standard-repertoire concert, including new music by Ezra Laderman and Ingram Marshall (whose work is featured on Verdery's latest CD release, *On Vineyard Sound*). The use of loop pedals, pop music arrangements, and pre-recorded voice might not appeal to every listener, but an artist exploring different approaches to represent the guitar deserves some credit. Perhaps it's best to listen to it all in an unprejudiced way and take it in... or not. (Verdery, too, is spotlighted in the [Summer 2016](#) of *Classical Guitar*.)

Earlier on Friday, in complete juxtaposition to the Verdery concert, [Carlos Molina](#) decided to program rather traditional repertoire, with music from Leo Brouwer, Astor Piazzolla, Manuel Ponce, and Abel Carlevaro. The second half of the concert featured soprano Marisa Molina, with arrangements of Enrique Granados' *Tonadillas* and *La Maja Dolorosa* being the musical focal points of the concert.

On Saturday afternoon, many strings were onstage for the FIU Miami Guitar Orchestra concert and guitar students' showcase. The percussive opening piece, "Tantra" by Carlos Rafael Rivera, got the audience's attention from the first down-"beat." As an unannounced surprise, guest soloist Ben Verdery closed the program in Hendrix-style with his *Scenes from Ellis Island* for guitar ensemble.

[Robert Trent](#) brought a variety of historical instruments, such as an original 1803 Fabricatore and a Thibouville-Lamy from 1830, and reminded us of the beauty of refined, underperformed, virtuosic 19th-century repertoire. The polished concert of sonatas, fantasias, and other pearls by Ferdinando Carulli, Mauro Giuliani, Fernando Sor, J.K. Mertz and Napoleon Costé surely did these authentic instruments and compositions justice.

Trio Anka entertained the crowd with new and arranged music for guitar, cello, and tenor, including the world premiere of "Miamiterranean" by Özgen, which was inspired by the cultural and landscape similarities between Miami and the Mediterranean. Concerts like this highlight the possibilities and importance of chamber music for guitarists, as both the audience and performers were very engaged throughout. Not only did the concert show the Trio's high performance level, but guitarist Kagan Korad also proved to be an excellent arranger as well.

The open discussion on the last day of GuitArt 2016, featuring both guitarist-(Özgen, Verdery, Aron, Federico Bonacossa, Carlos Rivera) and non-guitarist composers (Orlando Jacinto Garcia, Gregory Merti), revealed often-contrasting composition techniques and approaches. Panel members Rivera and Garcia also presided as judges for the composition competition that preceded the festival. On the last day of the festival, members of the Miami Guitar Trio premiered the winning pieces by Young Composers winner Mallory Strom, Emerging Composers winner Samuel Wells, and Honorable Mention Nathan Bredeson.

Throughout the festival, the luthier expo exhibited guitars by Manuel Contreras, Manuel Bernabe, and José Ramirez from local guitar dealer and sponsor Savino Music. Amalia Ramirez spoke about her family's guitar-building history and the significance of the collaboration with Segovia on instruments from the past and present. Luthier Kenny Hill modeled the latest innovations for his Signature and Performance Series guitars. Master classes conducted by the festival artists provided invaluable learning opportunities for students of all ages.

From the folk-inspired opening concert to the vibrant flamenco contributions of Felipe Carvajal and friends,

GuitArt 2016 offered a welcome, fresh approach, with its wide variety of styles, new or less-known repertoire, and different chamber music settings. All in all, audiences experienced the guitar in its full glory at the Wertheim Performance Arts Center. And kudos to FIU's sound engineer Paul Steinsland for doing an excellent job throughout.

Keep an eye open for updates about the next festival, on their [website](#).

Caption for photo at top, from left: Carlos Rafael Rivera, Stephen Aron, Orlando Jacinto Garcia, Ben Verdery, Mesut Özgen, Celso Cano, Rebecca Benitez

And here's a video bonus, *not* from GuitART of Robert Trent performing two pieces by Johann Kasper Mertz on a Scherzer 10-string guitar a few years ago.

Johann Kasper Mertz - Le Gondolier_Hungarian Fantasy.Robert Trent.m4v

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