

Celebrating The 25th Long Island Guitar Festival

When one reaches a major milestone, a celebration is in order. In years past, Harris Becker has curated a topnotch series of festivals, with an exceptional array of musicians, and the 25th was no exception. Mr. Becker, the founder of the Long Island Guitar Festival, chose to do a retrospective with as many of the performers of previous festivals as possible, while maintaining his embrace of presenting new works and world premieres, revisiting past masterworks, and keeping an eye to the future.

The 25th Long Island Guitar Festival was presented in the first warm days of spring at the LIU Post campus on the fabled Gold Coast of Long Island. Over the course of the nine days, one could attend intimate recitals in the half-timbered and historic Great Hall, listen to concerts in the Hillwood Cinema as well as the Recital Hall at Hillwood Commons, and participate in master classes at the Fine Arts Center at the highest point of the campus, which boasts a panoramic view of orchards and stables below. The LIGF began its existence as a one-day event, and, over the years has developed into a celebration of techniques, musicality, an exploration of historic and modern composition, and unpredictable innovation.

The Festival kicked off on the first of April with a Master Class and Q & A with the VIDA Guitar Quartet. Said Mark Eden: "The ensemble stuff is great for us to do for the students here. We loved what they did: they played some renaissance dances and there were a couple of guys who composed guitar trios, which we sight-read for them."

The following day, The VIDA Guitar Quartet (Mark Ashford, Amanda Cook, Mark Eden, and Christopher Stell) performed the opening concert with an esoteric and eclectic program, covering a wide range of eras, from the third Brandenburg Concerto to English Folk Songs to the 2010 *Opals* by Australian composer Phillip Houghton.

Mark Eden relished his time at the festival with great enthusiasm: "We came here as a duo in 2013 and this is the second time as a quartet. It's been lovely; Harris is a wonderful host. 25 years! He definitely deserves a medal for it! He's a very low-key person; he lets everyone feel so welcome.

"I've seen the lineup for the rest of the week, and it looks just amazing. He's doing a lot of reminiscing this time round, with the performers like Ben (Verdery), who is brilliant. It's a different buzz, energizing, it becomes like a big family. I love hearing everyone - all the different artists and different styles; everyone's very unique. Hats off to Harris for being able to pull that off!"

David Leisner has been featured a number of times, going back to the first years of the Festival. "Harris Becker always chooses great people to perform here. He chooses the most musical players, and that engenders an atmosphere of musicality and sincerity and integrity that is beautiful to behold. When I come here, I feel all that. I feel that in the audience, amongst my fellow players and colleagues and amongst students who come to play for me. It's a very nice atmosphere, very special." Leisner's program, presented in the intimate and historic Great Hall, covered a

lot of ground, ranging from Pachelbel and Haydn to modern masters Ginastera and Villa-Lobos, to Leisner's signature *Labyrinths*.

Female guitarists are well represented at Long Island Guitar Festival. In her third appearance at the Festival, in addition to holding a mesmerizing master class, internationally-renowned eight-string guitarist Raphaella Smits presented an outstanding and powerful program of primarily 19th- and 20th century works, including suites by Ponce and Mompou, compositions by Ariel Ramirez and Agustin Barrios Mangoré, and culminating with the compellingly emotive *Rossiniana no. 1 op.119* by Mauro Giuliani.

Armenian-born Gohar Vardanyan transported the audience with lively interpretations of influential Spanish composers: chansons and danzas by Albeniz, Sor, de Falla and Rodrigo bookended her sensitive rendering of *Valse Poeticos* by Granados.

Ana Vidovic's program was as elegant, graceful and powerful as her technique. An audience favorite, she began her program with a beautiful rendition of Bach's *Cello Suite in G major BWV 1107*. Renowned for the exquisite tone she coaxes from her guitar, Ms. Vidovic's program was expressive and romantic, covering early composers Scarlatti, and Giuliani, as well as Tarrega. The intensity of *La Catedral* and *Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios* by Agustin Barrios Mangoré was juxtaposed by the tender and bittersweet McCartney composition *Yesterday*. Her dynamic finale –the *Torroba Sonatina* – brought the audience roaring to its feet.

Young performers are a significant element of the LIGF, and previous years' students often are featured performers as they develop

their skills and musicality. Not only does the winner of the LIGF High School Classical Guitar Competition receive an award, and a feature as the Emerging Artist at the following year's festival, but the two runners-up also receive recognition and a feature concert for the resident Long Island Classical Guitar Society. In addition to the master classes he schedules for students with the world-class artists, Harris includes a Showcase Concert highlighting extraordinary student musicians from a college or university in the area. This year, the Arvo Duo (post-graduate students from Stony Brook University, Joenne Dumitrascu, violin and Ming-Jui Lui, guitar) was presented at the Great Hall.

Youth guitar ensembles have also been an important component of the LIGF since its early years. Ensembles from high schools around the country perform on the same stages as the headline artists. This year's groups came from Brentwood and Rocky Point on Long Island, the Harlem High School of the Arts in Manhattan, the Bishop McGuiness High School from North Carolina and Freedom High School in Orlando, Florida, with an evening concert by the Susan Wagner High School ensemble from Staten Island. At the culmination of the Festival, students from the various high schools appeared together in a grand ensemble, performing as the Long Island Guitar Festival Orchestra, conducted by Alan Hirsh.

Harris met Nguyen Thanh Huy, leader of the Guitar and Accordion Department at Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory in 2012. "Huy and his wife were here for the Leisner master concert, the world premier of the *HarrisDale Concerto* (a violin-saw-guitar piece composed by Alan Hirsh to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Festival) here in the lobby,

and for the LAGQ concert.”

That experience inspired Nguyen Thanh Huy to start his own festival. “I didn’t have anything at my conservatory, the guitar society in Saigon is small, you know? We decided to come to US to learn about festivals, we traveled around and finally we found out about Harris and his festival on the internet. I found Harris at the master class with David Leisner. Harris took me around the festival and introduced me to people, and showed me what to do. After that I came back to Vietnam and started my own festival with workshops and concerts. We asked Harris to come to that festival, and he did come.” 2014 was the first year of the Vietnam Festival, and there have been 2 festivals since. At the 2015 LIGF, Huy’s students from the Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory performed on Skype for the festival attendees, and Carlo Domeniconi’s concert was streamed live back to them. As a featured performer during the 25th, Huy performed a solo recital on Thursday, and as part of the Saigon Guitar Quartet on Saturday, in concert at the same venue that represented such a significant turning point in his career, celebrating the connection between the two festivals which are at opposite sides of the globe.

After Huy Thanh Nguyen’s premiere solo recital, the audience was treated to a chamber music concert of instruments and voices, featuring LIU Post faculty and alumni: Harris Becker and James Erickson, guitars; Emily Klonowski, mezzo-soprano and Christine Montalto, soprano; Veronica Salas, viola; and Karla Moe, flute.

The always-unpredictable Benjamin Verdery excitedly anticipated his performance, which was the final presentation of the festival. “I

felt for the 25th anniversary of this festival, I wanted to do something really special.” said Verdery. His program was primarily world premieres: a piece composed for him, a bold vocalization and guitar collaboration, an innovative instrumental underpinning for dance, as well as a striking triad of pieces inspired by J.S. Bach, performed on electric classical guitar with digital delay and loops. “There is a brand-brand new piece (*In Doubt*) by Estonian composer René Eespere written for me, and it’s really a beautiful piece.”

Verdery went on to say: “The classical guitar lends itself to collaboration, more so than most other instruments, including even electric guitar.”

“I did a project with a hip hop artist named Billy Dean, and I was so taken with the beat box performer, Mark Martin, who won the national beat box championship. Mark studied linguistics, and we decided to collaborate on a project, using Aristotle for the text. Mark uses mixed vocals: he sings, he talks, he makes sounds, and we adapted it together to my music. This is one of the most unusual collaborations I have ever done.” *From Aristotle* is a powerful mélange of current musical techniques supported by Verdery’s melodic sensibilities, and – judging by the delighted reaction of the teenagers in the audience – pushes the listener into an unexpected and innovative realm of performance.

Now You See It is Verdery’s foray into the intersection of music and dance, building gradually, with each dancer visually interpreting a selected etude, then joining Verdery at his end of the stage, creating a visual chorus.

“The dancers (including my daughter) are part of a very unusual dance company,

(Michiyaya Dance Company) and they have collaborated with me, creating choreography to my etudes. Each one does a solo and they all dance at the end, with some choreography and they are very versed in improvisation." He laughed, "the only problem for me is I get distracted by watching the dancers, it's so much fun!"

The work culminated with the entire corps dancing in a swirl of energy, joyfully joined by Mark Martin and Verdery himself, transitioning the melodic aspect of the piece into one entirely composed of jubilant rhythm and pure unadulterated exhilaration.

"Wow - twenty-five years of the Long Island Guitar Festival!" exclaimed Ben Verdery from the stage at the beginning of his concert. "Huge congratulations to Harris and his team for their extraordinary stewardship of the festival for all these years. Thank you!" We in the audience couldn't agree more.

- Amy Tuttle

Ana Vidovic



Ben Verdery



Gohar Vardanyan



David Leisner

Saigon Guitar Quartet



Vida Guitar Quartet

Harris Becker Masterclass



Ben Verdery and the Michiyaya Dance Company