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THE ARTS

The guitar: more than rock 'n' roll

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Sarasota resident Thomas Koch says he founded GuitarSarasota more than four years ago to "raise a little awareness" of his instrument's diverse repertoire.

"The guitar is so versatile," says the German-born recitalist, who specializes in classical guitar and now counts students at Florida Gulf Coast University, Booker High School and Manatee Community College among his protégés. "When I hear 'guitar,' I think 'classical.' But if I mention guitar to someone on the street, they might think 'rock 'n' roll,' 'Bob Dylan,' 'finger picking.'"

And in Sarasota, he says, there is room for stringed music of every sort. Since its establishment, Koch's nonprofit has brought an annual lineup of plucked programming -- master classes, private finger-picking recitals, large-scale concerts -- to the area, drawing strummers from all corners of the state. In half a decade, membership has grown to an estimated 75 musicians and fans.

On Saturday, GuitarSarasota heralds its upcoming season of three concerts with a two-act showcase at St. Paul Lutheran Church. The event, for which Koch recruited an all-ages mix of performers from Manatee, Venice, Sarasota, St. Petersburg, Tallahassee, Fort Myers and Miami, demonstrates classical guitar at its most miscellaneous. While the program's first half opens with German composer Christoph Kirschbaum and winds through Brazilian legends Antonio Jobim and Paulo Bellinati, it later treads the slightly older canon of Vivaldi and Albeniz.

The program's artistic director also hopes to introduce guitar enthusiasts to the instrument's collaborative potential. From Tampa, husband-wife duo Edward and Melinda Lugo will arrive with castinets in hand: unleashing a flamenco set of "Sevillanas," "Bulerias" and "Alegrias," one will dance while the other plays.

"This year, we're also bringing in the machete," adds Koch. "It's an ancient form of ukulele." John King, a Machete Espanola master from St. Petersburg, will join Tampa Bay area guitarist Richard Long for a demo.

Ultimately, though, what is great about the guitar is how well it holds its own as a solo instrument -- and Koch says he cannot wait to give that lesson at the showcase.

"Since I was 13 I had to explain, 'I play the guitar but I don't sing,'" he says with a laugh. "If I were a violinist, I don't think I would have to explain that every time."



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