

JoANN FALLETTA INTERNATIONAL GUITAR CONCERTO COMPETITION

By JULIA CROWE



PHOTOS: EILEEN BLAIR.

Left to right: Kevin Ramessar, Elio Rimondi, Masao Tanibe, Marco Sartor, Pablo Garibay, JoAnn Falletta, Sebastian Acosta-Fox, Gonzalo Gallardo, Robert Gruca, Isaac Bustos, David Galvez.

THE SECOND biennial JoAnn Falletta International Guitar Concerto Competition took place June 5-10 of this year with the sponsorship of the Buffalo Philharmonic and the radio/television station WNED. Approximately forty preliminary round submissions of unedited CD recordings had been auditioned from an open call for unsigned guitarists of all ages, resulting in ten semifinalists chosen to compete during this week for first, second and third prizes.

The preliminary round required the performance of one work of at least five minutes in duration from a live performance along with the first movement from the concerto of the competitor's choice with piano or orchestral accompaniment. (This year's selection of possible concertos included Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 99*; Manuel Ponce's *Concierto del Sur*; Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, Roberto Sierra's *Folias* and Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Concerto for Guitar and Small Orchestra*.) Contestants were also required to perform Bach's *Prelude and Allegro* from *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro, BWV 998*, in addition to a free choice programme of five to eight minutes.

The selection of the ten semifinalists was conducted by 'blind' judging where the CDs were slipped into plain numbered envelopes

and evaluated by a point system by the competition jury, which included programme directors Joanne Castellani and Michael Andraccio; John Landis, *Classical 94.5/WNED* programme host; David Dusman, president of Dusman Audio, Inc.; Jeff Cogan, Director of guitar studies at Chapman University and Director of the GFA competitions; Spanish guitarist Eduardo Pascual Diez; Grammy-award winning producer David Frost; and Marcin Dylla, the first place winner of the inaugural 2003 competition.

The ten selected semifinalists included guitarists Sebastian Acosta-Fox of the U.S.; Gonzalo Gallardo, of Peru; David Galvez, of Peru; Kevin Ramessar, of Canada; Masao Tanibe, of Japan; Isaac Bustos, of the U.S.; Pablo Garibay, of Mexico; Robert Gruca, of the U.S.; Elio Rimondi, of Italy and Marco Sartor of Uruguay.

The Semifinal Rounds were completed in two consecutive evenings in the Mary Seaton Room of Kleinmans Music Hall and for this round the contestants performed two selected movements from their chosen concerto followed by the set piece of *Evocation* by Milen Parashkevov, the winner of the associated 2005 Composer's Competition, followed by a free choice piece. Three finalists would be announced at the close of the second evening and these guitarists would go on to compete for first, second and third place

by performing their concertos with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Joann Falletta. First prize offered £3,250, in addition to paid engagements with the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony Orchestras; a recording contract with Fleur De Son Classics; and a concert guitar built by Canadian luthier Kamil Jaderny.

'We are fortunate to have here two presenters, one a world class symphony orchestra conducted by a dedicated guitarist and the other, a radio / TV broadcast association in the NPR / PBS Networks,' says Michael Andriaccio and Joanne Castellani. 'It is our hope to establish the highest level platform for the guitar and the finest young players.'

Since the inaugural competition in 2003, the Falletta Competition has instituted a new composers competition to feature a set piece of approximately five to eight minutes long in standard tuning. This year, the chosen piece was Milen Parashkevov's *Evocation*, now published by Berben Music (EE 5314). Parashkevov's *Dance of the Mountain Spirits* will soon be released by Berben Publications as well.

For those who have never visited Buffalo before, it is a historic town with roots set in the early days of American frontier trapping and trading, shipping and manufacturing. Springsteen's new *We Shall Overcome* album - *The Seeger Sessions* - features the song *Erie Canal* attributed to the waterway which made Buffalo its Western terminus. Buffalo is also famous for being the former manufacturing centre of vintage American restaurant and diner china, along with its recipe for hot, spicy Buffalo chicken wings. And its home-grown musicians include indie singer Ani DiFranco and classical guitarist Jason Vicaux. The downtown area remains a rare showcase of turn-of-the-century American architecture by E.B. Greene, Louis Blanchard Bethune, Joseph Ellicott, Richard Upjohn, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright and the local industry, I'm told, is now looking toward a new boom with pediatric cancer research and new medical technology development.

Buffalo is also unequivocally a guitar town, thanks to a man named Oswald Rantucci. Born in Abruzzi, Italy in 1907, Rantucci performed as a violinist with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra for fifty years and he also played mandolin and classical guitar, having studied with Alexander Bellow in New York. He was a devoted



Judges 2006: left to right, are: David Frost, Eduardo Pascual Diez, John Landis, Miguel del Aquila, Michael Andraccio, Jeff Cogan, Joann Castellani, Marcín Dylla.

pedagogue and head of the Guitar Programme at SUNY Buffalo until his death in 1988 at age 84, but he has left a flourishing legacy of devoted guitarists, including students Joanne Castellani, Michael Andriaccio, Mark Cudek of the Baltimore Consort and the Buffalo Guitar Quartet.

The local radio station, WNED, also sponsors a programme called 'Guitars for Hope' which enlists local artists and celebrities to design quirky, unique pieces of art made from giant plaster guitars donated by the Martin Guitar Company. These guitars are on public display throughout town for several weeks before going up for auction to raise proceeds to benefit a medical research foundation and a children's charity.

So with this in mind, it should not have been such a surprise to see the huge audience turnout for both the semifinals and finals of this competition. But it was. For once, I got the chance to see a classical guitar event greeted by crowds comparable in size to a rock concert. The audience included entire families ranging from grandparents to grandchildren along with local music instructors who expressed curiosity to the contestants about whether their practice habits and learning processes happened to be individual or else the result of intrinsic differences between American and European musical education. The answer to this was inconclusive, mainly because responses varied widely among the contestants.

I sat in on this second evening of packed semifinals sandwiched between winning composer Milen Parashkevov and luthier Kamil Jaderny. The 31-year-old Parashkevov, a native of Bulgaria, holds a Masters of Music from Texas Tech University where he studied with James Bogle. He had also studied at the Mozarteum in



First place winner Pablo Garibay, taking his bow.

Salzburg with Elliot Fisk. He held out his right hand to let me examine his bear claw-sized acrylic nails and told me he had written his entire score in pencil but luckily, he'd managed to find someone knowledgeable in scoring software to help him transcribe it into the required .pdf file at the last second. His three-part piece can best be described as intellectual, with its moving finish of fading, pensive harmonics, and the entire piece also has a knack for revealing both a player's strengths and weaknesses.

As each contestant offered their rendition, Parashkevov took to the edge of his seat, with all the nervous intensity usually reserved for watching World Cup championships, and muttered his encouragement to every player. Some might think it odd to hear the same piece of music performed ten times by different performers but it was compelling to hear the various interpretations and performer personalities funneling through the music. To my right, Kamil Jaderny, the luthier from Montreal by the way of Krakow, handicapped each guitar's tone and resonance, keeping a running tally of makers, and tapped my shoulder on occasion to verify.

The semifinalists performed through midnight with what had to be two exhausted accompanists on piano. Host Peter Hall of WNEB gathered the final ten onstage for an audience Q&A which included questions such as how old each guitarist was when they first started to play, what strings they used and how often they changed them. Each contestant answered in earnest, articulating a gamut of brand names and varying recipes for mixed brands between bass and trebles. And each time a player announced they changed their guitar strings every other day if not daily, the audience reared back and uttered a collectively awed, 'Wooo!' At a quarter after midnight, the competition's namesake, Ms. Joann Falletta, took the stage and announced the finalists announced in alphabetic order: Isaac

Bustos, Pablo Garibay and Masao Tanibe.

Born in Nicaragua, Isaac Bustos, is a faculty member at Texas A&M University's Department of Guitar Performance, where he received his Masters of Music and worked as a teaching assistant to Adam Holzman. He had studied guitar performance at the Conservatorio Nacional de Musica in Managua and received his Bachelor of Music from the University of New Hampshire on full scholarship. He has placed first most recently the Texas International Guitar Competition and the Lachine International Guitar Competition. This father of three is looking to continue his studies by pursuing a doctoral degree in guitar at Texas A&M.

Pablo Garibay of Mexico is a returning contestant to this competition after placing second and he is currently studying for his Master's degree in the Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt in Weimar, Germany with instructor Thomas Müller-Pering. He was inspired to pick up the guitar at age twelve after hearing his older brother playing Villa-Lobos pieces. When asked how he handles being in a competition, Garibay tells me, 'I calm myself beforehand by recalling my first thoughts about playing and with what pleases me when playing.' He acknowledges Conaculta, the Mexican National Arts Council, for assisting him with furthering his education and sponsoring his appearance at the competition.

Masao Tanibe of Japan already has a touring schedule in place with a tour this past summer covering Alicante Spain and six cities in Brazil. He had started learning the piano at the age of four before switching to a half-sized guitar under the instruction of his father, who is a music teacher to junior high school students and also a guitar enthusiast. Tanibe performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.'s Cherry Blossom Festival this past April and, echoing many of the contestants, he mentions working with the Buffalo Philharmonic has been a pleasure. 'I have never seen such a well-organized competition that is supportive to the last detail. Joann Falletta is very supportive and working with the orchestra has been a very comfortable experience. She recognizes and understands what a guitarist needs in addition to dynamics.'

After two days of intense semifinals, Thursday was an off day for everyone. I wandered around the hotel at 5:00 AM, partly due to my usual insomnia and partly out of hope to gain use of one of the only two hotel computers with internet access. The computer room sat off to the side of the hotel's ballroom where it is worth mentioning the Stephen King spook factor of hearing the piped-in hotel muzak shift unnervingly to the

same exact tune but on piano - except there is no lounge pianist at all because this music is piped in as well. Welcome to the 2006 version of the player piano.

There in the computer room off the empty ballroom, I found contestant Gonzalo Gallardo of Peru wide awake, peering into a screen. A graduate of Cornell University's School of Arts and Sciences, he is currently earning his Masters degree in both guitar performance and ethnomusicology from Florida State University, studying with Bruce Holzman. He also reads palms.

His reading for me was hit-and-miss but correct so far as to say a line in one palm revealed a tendency toward hoarding chocolate bars savoured in tiny pieces at leisure. I'm not kidding. (Perhaps some residual smudges had given me away.) I blame Mark Greenberg of the New York Guitar Society, who went to the trouble to prove his point that the stuff works better than beta-blockers for curing performance nerves after indulging us all in a box of Godiva. If it is a really good piece of chocolate, the effect is partly a pleasant distraction and the rest is probably Pavlovian conditioning.

Returning to my room, I'd scooped up a copy of the daily *Buffalo News* to see Marcin Dylla's face on the cover with a nice feature on his burgeoning career in the arts section. From the local news coverage, it was clear the contestants for this event had been greeted by the city like celebrities - one of their first stops had been a visit to WNED's television station for a guest appearance and welcome by Suzuki guitar playing schoolchildren.

Apart from the enthusiastic media madness surrounding the event, the competition schedule itself is relatively sane and considerate of its contestants and jury. The contestants gathered for a group outing to ride the Maid of the Mist boat at the bottom of Niagra Falls while the jury visited the falls from the Canadian side. What served as bonding and camaraderie for the contestants offered a bit of mind-clearing for the judges, who had spent several days of intense listening to several of the same pieces and concerto movements over and over again. A few members of the jury were suffering from the earworm syndrome - when a phrase of music sticks inside your mind and bounces around maddeningly like a jack-in-the-box. In the tradition of the gourmand's use of radish and ginger used to clear the culinary palette between dishes and the perfumier's sniffing a dish of coffee beans to clear the olfactory senses of a previous scent, pianist and classical music producer David Frost shared his effective cure for the earworm: hum the tune from the 1966 movie, *Born Free*.

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Friday afternoon I'd spent some time trying out luthier Kamil Jaderny's spruce guitar. I have to admit some initial skepticism, if only because I am not a spruce player and tend to first hear the articulation of 'blah' in the words **blonde wood**. I do admire how spruce can have a **unique wraith-like voice** that eventually speaks **from inside this wood**, once it has taken the time **to open up**. A good spruce can be like a gymnast or ballerina who can execute a perfect pirouette **after years of training** whereas the sound of **cedar is, by comparison, is all hips and skirts** like the flamenco dancer, the belly-dancer and burlesque.

Competition directors Michael Andraccio and Joanne Castellani had invited Jaderny to make a guitar as a prize for this competition after discovering his work at the GFA Montreal expo a couple years back. Jaderny, who lives in Mont-Tremblant in the northern part of Montreal, has been making guitars for all of six years, which is

astonishing to learn, given the level of craftsmanship of this guitar. He specializes in making French polished, spruce-top guitars with rosewood backs and sides and an elevated fingerboard which has a subtle and very effective grade. The minute my left hand reached the upper register, I was surprised by the ease of playing without feeling I'd lost my bearings due to the ramp height. In the past, I have picked up some elevated fingerboard guitars and noticed the ramp grade well before the ease of playing. His guitar had beautiful purfling detail, an ebony fingerboard and twenty frets up to note of C. The headstock is his own design and the neck is especially rigid, reinforced with carbon fibers.

The other attractive feature of his guitar is that the neck remains unvarnished so it feels smooth instead of slippery. The best way I can describe the effect is that it has the feel of gliding along a centuries old staircase banister which has a beautifully worn sheen on account of being well-traveled by many hands. The astonishing feature of this guitar is that it is only two weeks old and the spruce has already flowered open in its sound with a responsive vibrato. Jaderny modestly credits fellow builder Bruno Boutin for being his mentor and advisor for teaching him testing techniques for his materials. 'Boutin generously showed me his methods of testing braces, tops, resonances and was instrumental in my development and my building improved.'

Contestant Robert Gruca of Cleveland, Ohio, a student of both John Holmquist and Jason Vieaux, stepped into the conference room to try out the guitar, telling us that he routinely tests guitars for Armin Kelly of Guitars International. After trying out a smattering of Bach on this guitar and then

"From the local news coverage, it was clear the contestants for this event had been greeted by the city like celebrities"

comparing it to his old one that Gruca admitted his admiration for the playability and sound of Jaderny's guitar. He has a plane to catch but he lingers and swaps business cards. Marcin Dylla was taken by the quality of this guitar enough to instantly place an order for a custom model on the spot.

Friday afternoon, a handful of the semifinalists, including Sebastian Acosta-Fox, David Gálvez, Marco Sartor and Kevin Ramessar offered a free performance at the Knox Art gallery. Canadian Kevin Ramessar proved to be a versatile player, switching from Barrios's *La Catedral* on the classical guitar to playing Ralph Towner's

Anthem on a guitar signed by Larry Carleton (borrowed from WNED-radio's stash) and then offering a fingerstyle guitar piece by Ottawa native Don Ross on a steel string. Ramessar, who has recently released an album called *Sojourn*, also performs with a jazz band and plays trumpet as well with his ensemble, The Ramessar Quintessence.

Later this same evening, the Buffalo Philharmonic held a private concert and reception for its donors and sponsors, featuring a preview of its summer concerts. The programme included Mikhail Glinka's overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*; Jacques Ibert's *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra, Opus 37* with guest artist Betsy Reeds on flute; Pietro Mascagni's intermezzo from *Cavalleria rusticana*; Aaron Copland's Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo*; Aram Khachaturian's Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia from *Spartacus* and Alexander Borodin's 'Polovtziian Dances' from *Prince Igor*.

Conductor JoAnn Falletta's petite size belies her formidable energy, grace and command as she makes her entrance, bounding up the conductor's podium and slicing the first note out of the air with her baton. Ms. Falletta, who had also studied guitar at the Mannes College of Music in New York, is also Musical Director of the Virginia Symphony and Artistic Advisor to the Honolulu Symphony. Maestro Falletta has earned a Grammy nomination in the category of *Instrumental Soloist Performance with Orchestra* for her recording with English Horn soloist Thomas Stacy and the London Symphony Orchestra of *Eventide*, by Kenneth Fuchs, which is included in *Kenneth Fuchs: An American Place*, issued on the Naxos American Classics label.

Ms. Falletta tells me, 'In this competition, we celebrate our ten finalists as superb visiting artists. Buffalo is happy to welcome them, and to enjoy their excellent music-making in the semi-final rounds and in the final concert with



Joanne Castellani, Michael Andraccio, JoAnn Falletta.

the Philharmonic. Their presence enriches our region, and we hope that the competition will ultimately increase the presence of the classical guitar on orchestral stages throughout the world.'

Saturday's packed grand final concert event opened with composer Miguel De Aquila's *Giant Guitar Concerto*. His six and a half minute long piece opened with the theme of the six open strings of the guitar, using the harp for guitar strings along with plucked violin and later, horns for harmony - all in somewhat of an inverted play on Segovia's famous remark that the guitar can represent an entire symphony.

Finalist Isaac Bustos, who had never before performed with an orchestra, electrified the audience with his note-perfect performance of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Concerto No. 1 in D, op 99*. Pablo Garibay delivered an equally commanding performance of Manuel Ponce's *Concierto del Sur* in addition to demonstrating a fluently expressive colour palette.

For several days, I had been teasing Jaderny about how strange it was going to feel for him to go home without his prize spruce guitar in hand after his lugging it around the entire week and panicking over it like a watchful father, never letting it out of his sight for a single minute.

'I was making this guitar in May. The event seemed so far away I cannot believe I am here now, that it is actually happening,' he told me. Now for the first time, during intermission, Jaderny seems entirely at ease, compelling me to ask him why.

'I know it will be going into good hands, whoever wins,' he says.

The audience takes to their seats for the final contestant, Masao Tanibe, who performed Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* with equal amounts of technical precision and force. Unsurprisingly, Tanibe won the audience favorite award. Pablo Garibay was awarded first

place by the jury, along with the Musician's Award from members of the Buffalo Philharmonic. Tanibe placed second and Isaac Bustos placed third.

The evening closed with a reception for all the contestants, organizers, jury and members of the Buffalo Philharmonic at the Coda restaurant, whose staff merits mentioning for their remarkable recovery of Eduardo Pascual Diez' camera lens cap. Diez had proven to be an avid photographer, at one point attempting a daring shot of Niagra Falls which worried me into hanging onto his ankle.

With everyone much more visibly relaxed, I was able to catch up with a couple of the other semifinalists.

David Gálvez, who teaches at the Long Island Conservatory and performs solo and chamber music recitals with the Manhattan Guitar Quartet, reports, 'I had a wonderful time. In my opinion it is this most well organized competition in the world. If the goals of a competition are to promote the classical guitar in the community and to give recognition to the young outstanding performers, they were extremely successful. I can't wait to be back in two years.'

Similar sentiments are offered by contestant Marco Sartor, who studied guitar with Robert Ravera and Mario Paysee at the School of Music, University of Uruguay and later with Eduardo Fernandez, tells me he came to the United States in 2001 on a full scholarship to study at the School of the Arts, College of Charleston, under the direction of Marc Regnier. Now that the competition has ended, he has his hands full preparing for a move to Pittsburgh to study at Carnegie-Mellon University.

Elio Rimondi of Italy, who has won thirty-seven competitions, agrees. 'This is the best organized competition I have seen.'

The finalist's performances, which have been both recorded and filmed, are slated for radio and television broadcast on **National Public Radio**, the **European Broadcast Union** and the **Public Broadcasting System** toward early autumn 2006.



Luthier Kamil Jaderny and competition winner Pablo Garibay.

For further details on the next Composers Competition and the 2008 JoAnn Falletta International Guitar Concerto competition, including background on first place winner Pablo Garibay, log onto:

http://www.fallettacompetition.org/default_2.asp

JoAnn Falletta:

<http://www.joannfalletta.com/>

Buffalo Philharmonic:

<http://www.bpo.org/>

Fleur de Son Classics, Ltd.:

<http://www.fleurdeson.com/>

Luthier Kamil Jaderny's website:

<http://perso.cgocable.ca/kjaderny/index.htm>

Clip of Masao Tanibe's Kennedy Center concert:

http://www.kennedycenter.org/programs/millennium/artist_detail.cfm?artist_id=MASAO_TANIBE

Isaac Bustos:

<http://www.bustosguitarist.com/>



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