

Classical guitar series kicks off in Sarasota

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Audiences will be treated to the musical stylings of rising French classical guitarist Gabriel Bianco during the opening of the GuitarSarasota International Concert Series. "It's a really good event for us to present new talent," said Thomas Koch, president of GuitarSarasota. "And the other good thing, for young people, is that the concerts are still affordable." The series, which kicks off Saturday, features four concerts at Sarasota's St. Paul Lutheran Church through April 24. The venue was chosen for its beautiful acoustics, Koch said. It's the perfect place to showcase the mesmerizing sound of guitar.

The guitar is perhaps the most versatile instrument out there. On it, one can play anything from rock 'n' roll to ballads. Classical musical — which is highlighted during GuitarSarasota — has especially won the world over, according to Koch. It has even found popularity in the unlikelyst of places. China is producing some of the best talent in the world, Koch said. Australia has also embraced it. South America continues to heavily promote the craft. As far as guitar education, though, Europe is the frontrunner.

"All over Europe, we have music schools that are supported by the city, and all the instruments are taught," said German-born Koch. "The guitar is the most taught instrument in Germany, for example, after the piano."

GuitarSarasota headliner Bianco, 21, received training first-hand from his musical family. At age 5, he began learning from his father, but it wasn't long before he was enrolled as a student in several prominent Paris music schools, studying under the some of the country's best instructors. He played his first Paris concert at the age of 15. Since then, he's performed internationally and has composed new contemporary works, according to his Web site, gabrielbianco.online.fr. Winning the annual Guitar Foundation of America International Solo Competition in 2008 earned Bianco a 50-concert tour in North America. Here in the states, knowing how to break into the industry and become a successful classical guitarist can be tricky.

"It's not easy," Koch said. "I think every profession has its ups and downs and, in the music world it's very competitive. It's not as silly as 'American Idol.' But together with teaching and performing locally, there are possibilities."

Those like Bradenton resident and Southeast High graduate Alan Nguyen may be on his way to success. Nguyen is currently studying guitar at the University of Miami on a full scholarship. He presented a mini-concert last week at Art Center Sarasota for one of GuitarSarasota's monthly meetings. He drew a crowd of 80 people, Koch said.

A guitar orchestra, comprised of local students, will perform during the mainstage GuitarSarasota series. The students come from Southeast High School, State College of Florida and Booker High School.

With part of GuitarSarasota's mission focused on education, many area students are excited to be involved in the series. Some have the opportunity to participate in free one-on-one master classes, conducted in front of a small audience, with some of the best guitar teachers in the world.

Though Koch is thrilled to host Bianco during GuitarSarasota's featured series, he said there's more for classical guitar fans to look forward to. The series will premiere the guitar duo of Pablo Gonzales Jazey, from Argentina, and Koch as well as Denis Azabagic from Bosnia. A showcase concert will also be presented featuring a variety of area talent. "It's a lot of different flavors so to speak," Koch said.



CONTRIBUTED ART French classical guitarist Gabriel Bianco plays at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Sarasota. His performance opens the GuitarSarasota