

THE 2017 GFA CONVENTION AND COMPETITION: Multiple Panoramas

By Robert Ferguson

The annual GFA International Convention and Competition brings to the United States world-class players and scholars who share the GFA mission to “inspire artistry, build community, and promote the classical guitar internationally through excellence in performance, literature, education, and research.”¹ There is no doubt that GFA conventions and regional symposia achieve these goals every year. In 2017, this mission was advanced even further with the addition of two new programs, the youth-focused Guitar Summit and the International Ensemble Competition. As I reflect back over this year’s convention in Fullerton, California, as well as past conventions, the broad presentational sweep achieved within several subject areas conjures an image of multiple, intersecting panoramas. Here, I distill them to six.

1. Performance Panorama

Performances at the 2017 Convention took place on a number of levels. Concert artist recitals began with GFA’s 2016 Rose Augustine Grand Prize winner Xavier Jara on Monday evening, June 19, and continued mornings, afternoons, and evenings, ending with the Duo Siqueira Lima on Saturday afternoon, June 24. Throughout these performances the level of musicianship from every player neared perfection. A dozen nationalities were represented in this dazzling lineup of guitarists. These sixteen artist recitals were mostly performed on solo guitar, but there was variety along the way. In addition to Duo Siqueira Lima, the Pasieczny/Stanikowski Duo Project and SoloDuo performed programs for two guitars, as did the satirical and irreverent Crazy Nails! TrioConBrio, comprised of guitar, flute, and viola, offered the only mixed-ensemble performance of the concert series; Robert Barto performed a recital of early music on vihuela and baroque lute; and Marija Temo delivered one of the most original performances of the week, featuring mostly flamenco guitar solos and songs. In the latter, her guitar accompanied her own singing—a rarity in that style genre.

Along with the concert series, more performance artistry was on display in the three separate competitions held during the week. All rounds of all competitions were open

to the public, except the International Youth Competition (IYC) preliminary round. The International Concert Artist Competition (ICAC) began its preliminary round with forty-one contenders from over twenty countries. Twelve made it to the semifinals and from there four advanced to the finals. The results of the finals were:

Rose Augustine Grand Prize Winner: Tengyue Zhang (China) • 2nd Place: Andrea De Vitis (Italy) • 3rd Place: Alec Holcomb (USA) • 4th Place: Andrey Lebedev (Australia)

Thirty-two players from eight countries entered the IYC, sixteen each in the Junior and Senior Divisions. This event unfolded in two rounds, with four players from the two divisions advancing to the finals. The results of the finals were:

Junior Division 1st Place: Leonora Spangenberger (Germany) • 2nd Place: Gwentyth Aggeler (USA) • 3rd Place: Eric Wang (USA) • 4th Place: Marc Saura (USA)

Senior Division 1st Place: Shilong Fan (China) • 2nd Place: Alberto Daniel Quintanilla (Mexico) • 3rd Place: Xu Kun Liu (Canada) • 4th Place: Yun Duan (China)

The International Ensemble Competition drew twenty-five guitar groups to Fullerton, most from the USA but also from Mexico, Poland, and Bulgaria. Held in one round, this event divided into an International Ensemble Artist Competition (IEAC) and an International Ensemble Youth Competition (IEYC), with each further split into large and small ensemble divisions. The results were:

Large Ensemble Youth Division 1st Place: Austin Bella Corda • 2nd Place: California Conservatory of Guitar • 3rd Place: The Green Room Arts Youth

Small Ensemble Youth Division 1st Place: Felice Guitar Quartet • 2nd Place: Davisson Duo • 3rd Place: Pasadena Conservatory of Music Quartet

Large Ensemble Artist Division 1st Place: Octeto Sicarú • 2nd Place: The Green Room Arts Senior

¹ See the GFA mission statement at: www.guitarfoundation.org/?page=HistoryMission.

Small Ensemble Artist Division 1st Place: Erlendis Quartet • 2nd Place: Vickers Bovey Duo • 3rd Place: Ziggy and Miles Johnston

But even the concert artist series and the competitions didn't tell the whole performance story of the GFA Convention this year. The Youth Guitar Orchestra and the Guitar Orchestra also presented short programs, and additional performances took place in masterclasses and lecture-recitals.

2. Instrumental Media Panorama

The spectrum of guitar types, guitar groupings, and historical instruments in play also contributed to the week's panoramic view of the instrument. I already cited Robert Barto's vihuela and lute, Marija Temo's flamenco guitar and voice, and the guitar duos and orchestras that appeared in the concert series, all of which expanded upon the prevailing solo classical guitar model. SoloDuo also included baroque guitar in their concert. More variety could be found in the ensemble competitions—their very inception this year pointing to a heightened non-solo guitar emphasis—where guitar collectives from two to twelve members appeared. In a couple of the lecture-recitals, attendees were further treated to the sound of historical instruments, as I'll discuss shortly.

3. Composer/Style Period Panorama

In surveying the guitar literature presented to audiences throughout the week in the concert series, competition rounds, and lecture-recitals, the range is impressive. About 150 composers from the Renaissance to the present were represented. Those of the 20th and 21st centuries comprised two-thirds of that figure, encompassing all of Europe and the Americas. Their music spanned everything from avant-garde masterworks like Alvaro Company's *La Seis Cuerdas* to popular- and folklore-influenced pieces like Ian Krouse's *Dror Yikro* or Paulo Bellinati's *Jongo*. Composers outside the Western tradition, on the other hand, were sparse. There was also a well-balanced mix of guitar-specific (or lute- or vihuela-specific) and transcribed works.

4. Education/Research Panorama

Of course, advancing artistry in performance and composition is only half the GFA mission; the other half addresses the need for education and research, of which the latter was offered in abundance during the convention. Again, the sweep of subject matter was broad: pedagogy, technique, entrepreneurship, repertoire, interpretation, scholarly resources, and history. As already mentioned, a number of lectures included performances as well: Hermann Hudde's presentation on new music

from Venezuela, Robert Trent's on 20th- and 21st-century extended techniques, Rico Stover's on the music of Howard Heitmeyer, and Matthew Bishop's on the Weiss/Bach Sonata. A couple of lecture-recitals involved historical instruments: Jack Sanders' and Jason Yoshida's introduction to techniques for baroque guitar, vihuela, and theorbo; and Joshua Pierce's demonstration of antebellum repertoire in the United States on 1850s-era John Ashborn guitars. The educational component of the convention was further realized in technique workshops, masterclasses, and private lessons, conducted by some of the same world-class artists who came to Fullerton to perform and/or adjudicate.

5. Age Panorama

Although the International Youth Competition has long assured that the GFA International Convention and Competition will embrace players of diverse ages, with a Youth Social to boot, the initiation of the Guitar Summit this year, for guitarists from age 11 to 18, brought even more young players into the fold and made available to them a much broader field of musical experience. For a closer look at the successful launching of this new program, see Erin Young's review of the Summit on page 35 of this issue. The inauguration of the International Ensemble Competition this year also attracted a broad age range of players through its institution of Artist and Youth Divisions.

6. Hall of Fame Panorama

The capstone of every GFA convention is the presentation of the Hall of Fame awards (followed by the announcement of the ICAC final round results). This year's awardees, Alirio Díaz and Roland Dyens, posthumously received moving tributes from friends, family, and the entire GFA community in the convention's closing program. The artistry of these guitar luminaries sprang from different generations, countries, cultures, and aesthetic viewpoints. Their careers reflected in microcosm some of the rich variety that characterizes the classical guitar and its literature in modern times. Extraordinary video performances by both guitarists, shown during the awards ceremony, bore this out. There we saw two musicians who staked out different artistic claims across the classical guitar landscape but who also bridged disparate regions. Each player alone traversed a panorama of style and nationality. Alongside the efforts of countless precursors and contemporaries of talent and vision, Díaz and Dyens contributed to a collective musical achievement in the guitar world that eludes full comprehension—one that the annual GFA Convention and Competition does its part to preserve and continue.

—Robert Ferguson is the editor-in-chief of *Soundboard*.