

Artists' diversity dazzle Stetson guitar workshop

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DELAND -- The wide-ranging concerts that opened the 14th Stetson International Guitar Workshop Friday seemed to say it all.

The classical approach that characterized the mini-concert by workshop founder and artistic director Stephen Robinson could hardly have been more different than the one that came next.

The Canadian Guitar Quartet, workshop newcomers, gave a suave, quirky performance typified by long, expressive pieces by its composer/member, Patrick Roux, and equally unconventional arrangements of romantic and folk works.

Yet Friday's dazzling diversity only skimmed the surface at this year's Stetson guitar workshop, which continues to grow and attract artists from all over the globe.

The concerts include today's 3 p.m. performances by both Judicael Perroy and Jason Vieaux, the 7:30 p.m. mini-concerts of Eduardo Fernandez and Roland Dyens and Tuesday's 7:30 p.m. Participants' Concert, all on Stetson's DeLand campus.

As in past years, Robinson introduced the workshop and its master artists during a concert that began with contemporary composer Philip Houghton's tender "Kinkachoo, I Love You" and his atmospheric "God of the Northern Forest." Robinson's restraint and remarkable ability to produce flurries of crisp, gentle arpeggios served him well in the subtly varied movements of Federico Moreno-Torroba's Sonatina and John Doan's lilting "Farewell," with its distinctive Celtic overtones.

Less compelling, if exquisitely performed, was Robinson's foray into the blend of percussion, jarring rhythms and aggressive strumming that characterized his tribute to his fellow workshop leader, Dyens. That French composer's explosive "Libra Sonatine" was a mesmerizing experience, one that won Robinson standing ovations and demands for his lyrical encore, a brilliant flourish by Heitor Villa-Lobos.

The evening's second concert allowed the Canadian Guitar Quartet to show its range, and its players traveled far and wide. They launched their program with "Bidonville," an extensive, richly textured work by Roux that summarized his impressions of life in a sad, edgy part of town that translates as "Shantytown." Moody, edgy and confrontational, the work set the stage for other reflective, rather somber works.

The Canadian guitarists gave their arrangement of Camille Saint-Saens' "Danse Macabre, Op. 40" a witty, rollicking bawdiness that made it wonderfully lugubrious, and their medley of American folk tunes made their "Hoe Down" a toe-tapping whirlwind.

In their most ambitious work, Roux's pallid meander down memory lane, the guitarists sank into superbly performed passages that blurred into numbing navel-gazing. Roux introduced the work, his "Concerto Episodique," as representations of life's milestones: birth; memory; destiny. But the noble -- or merely human -- aspects promised in such a work failed to materialize.

The "Episodic Concerto" was an elegant, beautifully performed tangle of notes -- both string and percussive -- that refused to weave into broad, universal patterns. Chaotic, somber and deeply meditative, Roux's Concerto nonetheless presented the Canadian Quartet challenging material, and the performance was heroic enough to make it an interesting exposition.

Still, it was only with the broader beats and folk roots that melded in a rather regal "Hoe Down" that the quartet seemed to relax, to find a mutual voice, to join the guitar workshop's welcoming ranks.