



David Spelman founded the New York Guitar Festival in 1999.

KARSTEN MORAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

They'll Strum From Day Into Night

If there is one instrument with a built-in passport for crossing genres, it is the guitar. Central to folk music of all kinds, the backbone of the blues and, in its amplified form, both a supple solo voice in jazz and the lifeblood of rock, the guitar also has a classical literature that (with some transcriptional tweaking) stretches back to the 16th century and includes a rich, complex contemporary repertoire.

For players devoted to the instrument in its classical form, the guitar's seemingly universal accessibility can be both a blessing and a curse. On the bright side, just about anyone born after, say, 1950, has learned to play a few chords, and once you play an instrument a little, you have a substantial investment in it. When

you hear musicians who make it sing and dance, you are bowled over all the more.

But until relatively recently, when classical players and composers began to embrace the instrument's full patrimony — popular and classical — musicians intent on establishing the guitar's classical bona fides often showed a prickly defensiveness. For most the reasons were historical: When Andrés Segovia was fighting to persuade concert managers to present guitar recitals alongside piano, violin and cello performances, he was often thwarted by the notion that the guitar was a folk instrument, incapable of subtlety.

The New York Guitar Festival, founded in 1999 by David Spelman, a classical player turned impresario, has made a point of cele-

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Eliot Fisk, below, a curator of the New York Guitar Festival, teaches at New England Conservatory, above. He'll perform a set at the festival's marathon on Sunday.

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brating the guitar's split personality and of finding points of intersection among its classical, folk, jazz and pop sides. The festival, which occurs every two years, has also created a refuge for classical-guitar aficionados in the form of a marathon recital that, since 2004, has brought together established players and hot newcomers, usually in carefully assembled thematic programs at the 92nd Street Y.

This year's marathon, called "Bell'Italia," with sessions on Sunday at 2 p.m. and (after a dinner break) at 7, explores the Italian repertoire, from 16th-century lute works by Francesco da Milano through 19th-century pieces by Mauro Giuliani and Anton Diabelli, and contemporary scores by Luciano Berio, Carlo Boccadoro and Pino Forastiere.

"The Y came on board pretty early in the festival's history, and I think the idea of having a marathon was Hanna's," Mr. Spelman said, referring to Hanna Arie-Gailman, the 92nd Street Y's director of concert and literary programming. "We played around with the theme over the years. At first they were sprawling events, maybe 10 or 11 hours long, with everything from jazz to rock to classical. But then we began looking at the chronology of the guitar and its music, honing our ideas and looking at particular countries or regions — or in the case of the last marathon, in 2010, a single composer, Bach.

"And bringing on co-curators — guitarists like Pepe Romero and Sérgio Assad, and Paul O'Dette, the lutenist — has been very helpful in focusing on different parts of the repertoire."

This year Mr. Spelman's curatorial collaborator is Eliot Fisk, who will play a handful of short sets that includes transcriptions of Scarlatti Sonatas and Paganini Caprices, two Vivaldi Concertos (one a duo concerto with his wife, the guitarist Zaira Meneses) and works by Berio, including "Sequenza XI," which was written for Mr. Fisk.

Mr. Forastiere, who will perform his Etudes for Guitar in the evening, may be a highlight. Like other guitarist-composers who have performed in the marathons over the years Mr. Forastiere melds classical and pop moves, including a string-tapping technique popularized by the rock guitarist Eddie Van Halen.

Other marathon performers in-

clude the lutenists Hopkinson Smith and Nigel North and the guitarists Dale Kavanagh, Emanuele Segre, Jason Vieaux and Connie Sheu. In the concertos Mr. Fisk will be joined by the Harlem String Quartet. And the program includes a set by the vocal ensemble Lionheart, which Mr. Spelman said is meant to put the early music, particularly the Milano works, in perspective.

"I proposed the 'Bell'Italia' theme," Mr. Fisk said, "partly because Italy is important in the development of the guitar, but also because we're always looking for good repertoire, and for works by composers who are important in the history of music, beyond the guitar. So in the Milano works you have the great contrapuntal tradition — works of extreme perfection that would sound wonderful if they were performed by a string quartet, something you cannot say for a lot of guitar music. And it was an excuse to call on Scarlatti, Vivaldi and Paganini, who are more interesting than any composers who wrote strictly for the guitar before the 20th century."

About the Berio, Mr. Fisk said: "The 'Sequenza' series proceeds from the view that instruments themselves have reached a kind of wisdom through the ages, and the guitar 'Sequenza' demonstrates that by using lots of effects from the flamenco and classical canon, combined with the wildness of extended techniques. It also includes a purely visceral element that I think contemporary composers too often forget about, because today we're so taken with the cognitive side."



Marathons can have both charms and drawbacks. Listeners get to sample several players and styles in a single sitting, but you cannot take the full measure of a musician's strengths in a 30-minute set. And the musicians may find themselves coming to the end of their performance just as they are getting comfortable with the hall and the audience.

"I didn't find that a problem," said Mr. Romero, who helped assemble the 2006 marathon. "I found it a lot of fun, because guitarists all know and respect each other, but we never have an opportunity to spend time together and to really listen to each other. The marathon — not only the performance itself, but sitting backstage and warming up with my colleagues — provided that opportunity."

Mr. Spelman, 45, began playing the guitar as a child in Washington and has worked as a publicist

A celebration of the guitar will close with an Italian-accented marathon.

and concert promoter in New York since 1993. But he got to know the guitar from the inside out in his first job, as an apprentice to Jeff Traugott, a California luthier who builds steel-string instruments. While working for Mr. Traugott, in Santa Cruz, he took a master class with Benjamin Verdery that, he said, helped shape his relationship with his instrument.

"Here was a guy who turned up in a Hawaiian shirt, short pants and flip flops and gave a recital that included his own works, Bach pieces and his own transcriptions of Jimi Hendrix songs," Mr. Spelman said. "This just blew my mind, and I thought this is what I wanted to do."

He returned to the East Coast and enrolled at the Peabody Institute, in Baltimore, to study the guitar and record production, and continued his studies at the New England Conservatory, in Boston. In a job at the Celebrity Series of Boston, a concert-presenting organization, he learned what he described as "the mechanics of putting on performances — booking artists and doing the marketing and fund-raising."

In 1999 Mr. Spelman teamed up with John Schaefer, the NYNC-

FM radio host, to present the first New York Guitar Festival. (Mr. Schaefer remains involved; as the host of many of the events, he conducts onstage interviews and broadcasts the performances on his "New Sounds" show.)

The festival offered three programs at Merkin Concert Hall that first year: one devoted to works by Terry Riley; "Plucked and Bowed," which brought together guitarists and other string players; and a tribute to Hendrix by classical, jazz and rock guitarists. Since then its presentations have more than tripled and expanded to halls all over town. Highlights have included full-album tributes, in which starry casts have reinterpreted rock classics like Bob Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks" and Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska" (for which Mr. Springsteen turned up and performed in a concert-ending jam).

Mr. Spelman has also overseen offshoots, including the Ellinora Guitar Festival at the Krannert Center in Urbana, Ill., as well as versions in Adelaide, Australia; Toronto; and Amsterdam. Their success may be bad news for the New York festival.

All the others were presented under the wings of single institutions, which provided the halls, covered budgets and saw to the marketing and other details. In New York, by contrast, the festival's expansion to the variety of sites, with a patchwork of sponsors, has been a double-edged sword. Lately Mr. Spelman has been talking about putting the original on hiatus.

"The unvarnished reality is that the situation with sponsors has changed," he said. "I always like to do a bit more in each festival than I did before, but trying to do more with less is getting harder and harder."

"I also feel that I'm at the beginning of my career as a presenter, and while I haven't lost any love for the guitar, I have so many ideas that bring in literature, poetry, visual arts, multimedia and dance, and I'd like to be able to think in terms of multi-year arcs. Working at the Krannert Center has been a dream, in that sense, and I'm planning now for the 2013 Ellinora Festival there."

Does that mean there will be no New York festival in 2014?

"Well," Mr. Spelman said, "I always answer my cellphone. And I don't like to say no. That's been part of my problem. But I have to either find a way to ensure that this festival has a future, with room to grow and become a real fixture on the New York musical landscape, or I have to take a step away from it and think seriously about how to proceed."



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David Spelman, right, founder of the guitar festival, working at the Metaphonic Recording Studios in Manhattan with the guitarist Grey McMurray, left, and an engineer, Hernán Sandoz.

Guitar Marathon: Bell'Italia, Sunday, 2 p.m., 92nd Street Y, Kaufman Concert Hall, 1395 Lexington Avenue; (212) 415-5500, newyorkguitarfestival.org, 92y.org; \$25 to \$48.