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Classical guitar unleashed!

UCSC's Mesut Ozgen takes guitar in new directions

By **WALLACE BAINÉ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

For those who never thought it possible, classical guitar is indeed moving into the multimedia age, at least in Santa Cruz.

No more of this guy-in-tuxedo-sitting-on-a-stool stuff for two hours, at least not for Mesut Ozgen, the Turkish-born guitarist and UC Santa Cruz prof who hosts this weekend's "New Dimensions in Classical Guitar."

"In concert, with classical guitar, non-musicians can be easily bored," said Ozgen. "For musicians and guitarists, it's different. You're thinking constantly along with the performers. But for non-musicians, it can get boring."

When Ozgen says "New Dimensions," he means it. Not only will the musical selections depart sharply from the classical canon into folk-based and international music, but the whole show will feature a provocative visual component, including still images, film, digital art and theatrical lighting and effects.

Ozgen, who joined the UCSC music faculty in 1998, is making a strong push for higher visibility in the area with two concerts Saturday and Sunday at UCSC's Music Recital Hall presented by the university's Arts & Lectures, and another performance March 13 at the Mello Center in Watsonville, where Ozgen was recently named artist-in-residence.

The concert is designed as a wide-ranging, free-wheeling revival of classical guitar, replete with interdisciplinary collaboration and improvisational runs, often from compositions inspired from other

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artistic sources, musical and otherwise.

The music is rooted in collaboration between Ozgen and a wide variety of composers, from famed British orchestral composer Anthony Gilbert to Indian composer and fellow UCSC faculty member Deepak Ram.

Among the more intriguing selections:

- Gilbert's "Stars" for guitar and recorder was inspired by an engraving by the fabled visual artist Maurits Escher, known for his illustrations of geometric shapes and patterns that defy the laws of logic and science.

- Former UCSC prof Robert Strizich's "La Guitarra" for soprano, guitar and percussion was inspired by the Federico Garcia Lorca poem of the same name, which was itself originally inspired by Spanish flamenco music. The "percussion" in the piece will be three wine glasses of different pitches, each struck or rubbed to create the desired note.

- Robert Beaser's "Shenandoah," inspired by the beloved 19th-century American folk tune. The piece is not a traditional theme-and-variations, said Ozgen, but is built around the textures of the original song.

- Ram's "Surya" for guitar and bansuri (the Indian bamboo flute), drawn from the North Indian classical tradition, emulating the basic elements of Indian music and dedicated to the great sitarist Ravi Shankar.

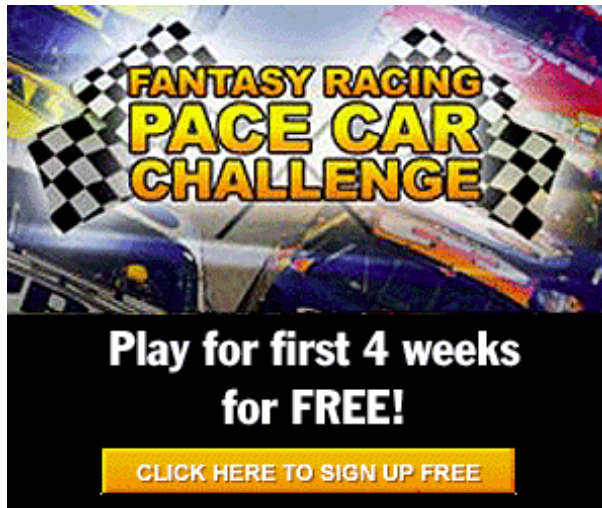
- "Notes for Peace" by American composer and guitar virtuoso Benjamin Verdery (a semi-regular visitor to Santa Cruz), which uses high-tech flourishes such as amplification (electric classical guitar!) and digital delay with low-tech touches such as paper clips and chopsticks.

That's not all, either. Christopher Pratorius, who recently won the "Sound Horizons" competition at New Music Works, contributes his first major guitar piece, based on an old Spanish folk song from the age of the troubadours. Other pieces include one inspired by an Argentinian merry-go-round children's game and another mines the Turkish folk tradition of Ozgen's homeland.

And, oh, the visuals. Each piece has its own visual design, all employing the videography of visual artist Gustavo Vasquez, the digital visualizations of computer artist Peter Elsea and the scene design and lighting of dramatic technician David Lee Cuthbert.

"Each artist brought their creativity to the project, and I allowed them absolute freedom," said Ozgen.

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The star performer of the show, Ozgen himself, first came to the United States from Turkey in 1991. In Turkey, Ozgen was a physician working both in sports medicine and occupational medicine. Meanwhile he was playing guitar, a pastime that began to consume his interests. At the encouragement of Benjamin Verdery, a friend Ozgen had met on the guitar circuit, he abandoned medicine and struck out for the Yale School of Music where he was the first guitarist awarded the school's highest honorary prize.


"It's ironic," he said. "Verdery is the man responsible for my being in the U.S. and he's always said that Santa Cruz is his 'dream place.' And, now I'm here, in his dream place."

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