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ARTS IN POLK

Robert Phillips commissions new music for 'guitar in dance rhythms'



PAUL CATALA

LAKELAND — They're renowned fellow Florida composers he admires and he wants everyone to know.

Robert Phillips is classical guitarist, instructor at Harrison School for the Arts and is on a musical mission to bring even more exposure to the music of some of his favorite Central Florida composers with international acclaim; he's doing that by commissioning them to write new music for "guitar in dance rhythms."

For Phillips, 63, who lives in Lakeland with his wife, Kathy Connally, the idea is to unify the composers' works through their abilities to compose with various rhythms related to dance styles such as waltz, tango, rhumba and the Cuban "songo," which incorporates rhythmic elements from the rumba into popular dance music.

"I felt like doing this was an opportunity to do something that would be a major contribution to the literate of classical guitar," he said.

To get the tunes flowing and the rhythms in step, Phillips contacted six Central Florida composers to mold new music for guitar written with the dance rhythms: Howard Buss, Lakeland; Troy Gifford, Benoit Glazer, Charles Griffin, Jorge Morel, Orlando; and Rex Willis, Sarasota. Phillips said he would also be contributing a composition.

Phillips is not a newcomer to commissioning music: in 2008, he commissioned work from Grammy-award winning composer Michael Colina for the Lakeland's Imperial Symphony Orchestra called "Goyescana for Guitar and Orchestra."

"I think (the composers) are looking forward to making contributions to a challenging and exciting project," he said.

Phillips added the composers were selected based on location, experience and style. He plans to meet with each one of them a few times during the writing process, giving input and guidance as they compose. He said it's important the composers' styles were compatible with audience expectations.

"The music should be classically oriented and should satisfy the most discerning listener, but at the same time, must appeal to the more casual audience member," he wrote on his Kickstarter funding web page.

It's an admirable venture with broad appeal, said Buss, a musician, composer and retired public school and college teacher.

Buss, an American composer of contemporary classical music and a trombone player who taught music in Lakeland for 40 years, including Florida Southern College in the late 1970s and early 1980s, said he was happy to contribute his commissioned 8-minute, 15-second piece, "Dances and Interludes." Divided into three parts, he said it contains songo, bossa nova and rumba flamenco passages.

"(The project) will help contribute to the overall reputation of classical guitar," he said. "And it's also a local project; it's nice to be able to go to the performer's

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house and be able to discuss the piece and the elements in it. In the Lakeland area, there are musicians that are collaborating and working on wide distribution of the music they're producing, especially in the realm of modern, classical music."

Phillips has an international plan for the collaborative creations once they've hit the last measures: putting together a concert program of these new works and perform them.

Phillips plans to record the works this summer and hopefully release the music on a record label. By mid-July, he said, he hopes to premiere them at a concert in Madrid,

followed by streaming concerts on the web, a U.S. tour and a performance in New York at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, where the composers will have the opportunity to have their new music reviewed.

And the endeavor is all building to crescendo from Phillips' home and office, where he will rehearse to give the commissioned pieces a proper send-off into international sonic spectrum.

"I hope this music finds its way into the permanent repertoire of classical guitar and continues to be performed by others into the future," he said.

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