

MARTHA MASTERS

San Antonio Express-News
October 22, 2000

Music: 28-year-old takes top laurels in GFA solo guitar competition

By Mike Greenberg
San Antonio Express-News Senior Critic

Poise, maturity and clean technique won the day on Saturday when Martha Masters took first prize in the 18th International Guitar Foundation of America Solo Guitar Competition.

Masters was among four competitors in the final round, which took place at Travis Park United Methodist Church.

The GFA competition is the largest of its kind in this country.

First prize includes a \$5,000 cash award, a digital recording produced and distributed by Naxos, a concert video by Mel Bay Productions, a guitar designed by Thomas Humphrey and built by C.S. Martin & Co. craftsmen and a tour with more than 40 engagements.

Masters, 28, completed her doctorate last spring at the University of Southern California, where she studied with Scott Tennant. Previously she had studied under Manuel Barrueco at the Peabody Conservatory.

Masters played works by the 20th-century Mexican master Manuel Ponce and the 19th-century Frenchman Napoleon Coste, along with two short works by Miroslav Tadic, a Yugoslavian émigré who teaches at the California Institute of the Arts.

Masters put her ample dexterity to good use in Tadic's "Walk Dance," a sort of Slavic bluegrass piece, and brought many thoughtful details to Ponce's "Theme, Variations and Finale" and Coste's "La Source du Lyson." Her control of instrumental color was exemplary.

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American Record Guide **Issue: January/February 2002**

By Steven Rings

Martha Masters, guitar. (Guitar Recital)
TANSMAN: Cavatina; BACH: Lute Suite 1; SOR: Mozart Variations;
JOHANSON: Finnish Variations; PONCE: Theme, Variations, Finale;
RODRIGO: En los Trigales -- Naxos 555720 -- 64 minutes

Another of Naxos's Laureate Series releases (see above). American guitarist Martha Masters won both the Guitar Foundation of America and Segovia competitions in 2000. Her playing is refined and elegant, with an understated sophistication. She rarely overwhelms with virtuosity, instead focussing on the expressive details and shape of each phrase. This makes for a style of playing that does not draw attention to itself, but instead shows an admirable level of musical maturity and restraint. At its best, this yields an intimacy and tenderness that can be thoroughly affecting, as in the sarabande from Tansman's Cavatina or in Ponce's enigmatic Theme, Variations, and Finale. In these works her understated approach gradually draws one in, creating a cumulative effect of deepening connection to the work's expressive core. Sometimes the approach seems too careful, as in the Bach Suite. Here more rhetorical extroversion is called for. The opening Prelude and Presto show Bach at his youthful, exuberant best; her playing here, and in the entire suite, is far too respectful and musically cautious. This is dramatic and, yes, virtuosic music, and it should sound that way.

But on the whole, the works here benefit from the guitarist's moderation, interpretive care, and insight. Sor's famous variations have rarely sounded more musically substantial. She takes the slow introduction seriously, giving beautiful shape to lines that are often given only a perfunctory reading or skipped altogether. The whole performance of this piece actually comes close to capturing some of the magic of Magic Flute itself, that extraordinary combination of low humor and religious reverence. Bryan Johanson's evocative Variations on a Finnish Folk Song offers a wonderful change of atmosphere, and Rodrigo's En los Trigales rounds out the program with a flourish and a hint of the extroversion that seemed to be lacking in the Bach.

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July 2001

Martha Masters – Guitar Recital Naxos Guitar: Laureate Series (8.555720)

David's Review Corner

"The millennium was a good year in the life of Martha Masters, her prestigious first prize in the Guitar Foundation of America Competition being followed by a winning performance in the famous Andres Segovia International Guitar Competition. That led to a series of concerts around the United States, and a contract to record an album for Naxos. She has certainly not chosen the 'quick fix' easy route to popular acclaim, her program being a nicely balanced mix of Bach's famous Suite in E with the comparative rarity of Bryan Johanson's Variations on a Finnish Folk Song. Her cosmopolitan taste is supported by playing of outstanding skill, the razor-sharp unanimity between hands ensuring absolute precision even when the music is hurtling by. As an intro to her playing try Sor's animated Variations on track 12, a superb pageant of guitar colours and finger dexterity. Is there a lack of stylistic difference between Bach and the 20th century of Alexandre Tansman and Johanson? Well maybe, but that's being a bit picky, and I would happily swap it for her complete technical assurance and ability to shape music into long paragraphs. The recording is to the same immaculate standard that we have come to expect from this source."

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September 6, 2001

Martha Masters – Guitar Recital Naxos Guitar: Laureate Series (8.555720)

Classical Music Web by Andy Daly

"The classical guitar has always been indebted to Andrés Segovia's efforts in inviting contemporary composers of his day to expand the repertoire of the instrument. Along with Manuel Ponce, Federico Moreno Torroba and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco et. al., was the Polish composer Alexandre Tansman. Tansman's use of rhythm and harmony was obviously Polish in its origins and added an Eastern European flavor to Segovia's concert programs.

In recent years Tansman's music has become somewhat neglected. His name does not occur so frequently in recitals or on recordings; certainly not as frequently as some of the other composers associated with Segovia. It is therefore nice to hear Martha Masters play the five movement *Cavatina*, this being not only her first recording for Naxos, but also the first time that the name of Alexander Tansman appears in the Naxos catalogue (although there is at least one disc of his in the collegiate Marco Polo catalogue Ed.). Of course musical tastes change with the passage of time and Martha Masters does not try to emulate Segovia's individual style but with her use of tone colour, at times markedly sweet, she does in her own way capture the spirit of Tansman's music remarkably well.

J.S Bach's *Lute Suite No.1, BWV 996* is a much-recorded work. With any new version, the question is 'Does another interpretation offer anything new?' In this case, I think that it probably does. Masters gives a solid yet refreshing view. The repeats of the Allemande, Courante, Bourrée and Giga are ornamented in a most delightful way and the general atmosphere of the Baroque is well maintained throughout.

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[Continuation of review from *Classical Music Web* by Andy Daly]

Like Jean Sibelius, Bryan Johanson has taken myths and legends of the *Kalevala*, the epic poetry of Finnish literature, as inspiration for his *Variations on a Finnish Folk Song*, albeit not on the grand symphonic scale of Sibelius. He has however composed an intriguing piece. It evokes much of the mystery of these heroic tales. The atmospheric beginning eventually takes us to a more rhythmic central section, which employs tambora and harmonics but this only gives a brief respite before returning to the ethereal world of the opening.

Ponce's *Thème Varié et Finale* and Rodrigo's *En Los Trigales*, both popular works of these composers are treated to dignified readings, Masters' playing is full of conviction.

On this disc the only slight disappointment for me is the Sor. Fernando Sor's *Variation on a Theme of Mozart* must be one of, if not the most well known of that composer's works. Guitarists enjoy playing it not only because of its technical demands, but also because it is immensely entertaining and also fun to play. These days, however, in concerts and on recordings it is regarded as a 'bit old hat.' Although Masters is assured technically it just does not hold the magic of some performances.

Despite my reservations about the Sor, taken as a whole, this disc should be no disappointment to those purchasing it. The Tansman and the Johanson being worth the outlay."

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Savannah, GA Concert Review **April 26, 2002**

By Dale Reagan

Martha Masters presented a magical evening of guitar music to a small, but enthusiastic audience. Her performance was a model for any aspiring guitarist - she was poised and professional while she presented a varied program that spanned many styles and periods of classical guitar music. While each piece was a gem alone, this artist managed a 'concert flow' that led the audience from one piece to the next - the evening ended too quickly! It was a wonderful musical experience. I look forward to the next opportunity to hear this musician.

Martha's presentation of pieces from the classical era was simply inspiring - pieces from this period are often just 'played through' - Martha brings them to level that few ever reach or even hear - it was simply an exceptional performance. A few days after the concert, while listening to a track from Martha's Serenade CD, a close friend asked, "How many guitars is that? It sounds like an orchestra..."

As the event organizer it is somewhat difficult to provide an unbiased account of the evening, but as a guitar 'consumer' I heartily recommend Martha to you - book her now since I believe that her fees are destined to reach the levels of the current 'stars' in the CG arena - she is a world class guitarist and a world class person..