

Posted on Wed, Jun. 21, 2006

MUSIC

Event could spark classical guitar's revival

By ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ
efernandez@MiamiHerald.com

The guitar is the world's most popular instrument. Introduced to the Western world via Spain during its seven centuries of Muslim hegemony, the guitar's ancestors evolved in the Iberian peninsula into the instrument we know today. When the guitar migrated to the New World, it became the preeminent Latin American instrument.

The purest guitar -- the one closest to its Spanish roots -- is what we call the classical guitar: the light, soft-stringed, hour-glass shaped instrument; the body of works written for it; and its performers, one of whom, the Spaniard Andrés Segovia, became a household name in the 20th century.

With this pedigree, one would imagine such a Latin city as Miami to be a hothouse of guitar activity. Not so.

The Miami Classical Guitar Society, founded by Carlos Molina 19 years ago soon reached 100 members, but today about 100 members is all it has. Intent on changing that panorama, Molina has founded the Miami International Guitar Competition and Assemblage, which runs this week through June 25.

"For many years, I've been invited to be a juror at international competitions and I've seen a great movement of young people in them," says Molina, in his Kendall home. ``That's what motivated me to start a competition here."

In fact, Molina has organized guitar competitions in Miami before, under the aegis of the Guitar Foundation of America, in 1991 at Florida International University and 2002 at the Miami-Dade College Wolfson Campus -- Molina has taught guitar at both institutions. In his native Cuba, which he left in 1982, he organized the island's first guitar festival in 1976.

The 60-year old Molina is a one-man campaign to revitalize the classical guitar. In the rest of the country, he admits, the fate of this most popular instrument in its classical mode is not much better than in Miami. "Most guitar students at American music schools are foreigners," he says. Yet, when he travels to competitions in Europe, there are always between 40 and 60 competitors.

"The problem is that when an American student wants to take up the classical guitar, he must do so in college, which is where instruction is offered," Molina observes. ``Like any instrument, it is best to start studying it as a child."

To "embellish" the Miami competition, Molina has invited four world-class guitarists to perform -- there will also be master classes, lectures and, of course, the competition itself. The first, Spain's David Martínez, who performs tonight, is the winner of the prestigious Andres Segovia Contest.

Molina was trained in Cuba, where he studied with famed teacher Isaac Nicola. "Cuba was the first country where the *vilhuela*, an early guitar, was taught," Molina explains. ``It was taught by a master who came in Columbus's second trip, in 1514 and settled in the city of Trinidad."

In the 19th century, a large Spanish immigration to Cuba brought several guitarists and the first guitar conservatory was founded by Ubert de Blank, a Dutch musician who was also a Cuban patriot during the struggle for independence from Spain.

In 1933, the Conservatorio de La Habana established a guitar chair. "In the '30s, the Cuban José Rey de la Torre was Segovia's greatest rival," Molina says. In that decade, the first guitar society was founded in Cuba.

With the Cuban exile, the classical guitar did not flourish. "The exiles were too busy with survival to be concerned with the arts," Molina notes. ``But it's no longer true that there is no culture in Cuban Miami. Things have changed."

Molina hopes that one big change will be a renewal of interest in his beloved instrument and that the competition will

attract an international roster of guitarists. The tradition of classical guitar to which Molina is heir would shine again in this, its new home.