

The Gazette 2

Everything old is new again — at Strathmore Hall

by **Chris Slattery**
Staff Writer

What's new at Strathmore? Not what you think.

When Phil Mathieu and Giorgia Cavallaro perform "American Music for Two Guitars" on Saturday evening, they'll usher in the new: the never-before-recorded original compositions of guitarist William Foden. That Foden was bright light at the turn of the penultimate century — he lived from 1860 to 1947 — makes this music old as well as new. And that Mathieu can usually be found making roots rock with Wammie winners Ruthie and the Wranglers makes it something different altogether.

"It was very difficult — challenging," admits Mathieu, a bonafide D.C. native who was born in Providence Hospital and grew up in Rockville. "It was music that had never been recorded before, and when you took it past the 90 percent point, it became difficult ... intangible, where you're really digging in."

Mathieu says the sessions with Cavallaro, who he's known for almost 20 years, had a definite sense of trial and error.

"We were on our own," he says, adding that Foden just happens to be "an overlooked American composer. The guitar is very young in terms of being respected in the classical world. Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven never wrote for the guitar."

And so classical guitarists sometimes have to search in unexpected places to find the good stuff.

"It's a blessing and a curse."

Building bridges

Everyone's expecting a flurry of Strathmore "firsts" as 2005 rolls in. New Music Center, of course, and new residents and new programs — all the endless possibilities a dramatic 2,000-seat concert hall (set to open Feb. 5) has to offer.

But the "old Strathmore" was never short on unique, top-quality programming, and the ongoing Music in the Mansion series continues to prove that. Offering chamber music, folk and swinging jazz in a wood paneled music room with superb acoustics, Music



Photo courtesy Ruth Logsdon

It takes two: Phil Mathieu and Giorgia Cavallaro perform "American Music for Two Guitars" on Saturday in The Mansion at Strathmore.

in the Mansion is a way to bring past and future together, says Shelley Brown, Strathmore's Director of Programming.

"Philosophically, I've always felt it's important to understand the musicians who came before in order to put the current artists and performers into perspective," Brown says.

Getting a perspective on Foden means employing the word "virtuoso." The St. Louis-born violinist started at age 7 and was conducting a small orchestra by 15. He took up the guitar, and was soon being touted as the premier American-born guitarist — decades before the birth of rock 'n' roll gave a whole new meaning to that title.

Brown says composers like Foden "serve as a bridge; they show us the greatness... we weren't ready to see a long time ago.

"And one of the great things about Phil is that he's so comfortable in a variety of idioms. That makes him another kind of bridge!"

Stringing along

Saturday's concert will be a number of things rolled into one, but at its heart will be a CD release party for an extremely pretty piece of music called "American Music for Two Guitars." The liner notes say the album "was inspired by our dear friend and teacher John E. Marlow (1939-1992)" and Mathieu confirms this dedication.

"He was my friend and teacher, and he passed away," the guitarist says. "It was a sad moment for me."

Marlow was an inspiration for a guy who became a musician "against the odds."

"My parents were encouraging — they didn't force me to become a lawyer or anything — but they weren't musical."

Indeed, Mathieu "never even took band" at Robert E. Peary High School, but remembers listening to rock music at 10, then discovering jazz at 15.

Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, then jazz fusion in the 1980s led him back to "pure jazz be-bop: John Coltrane, Charles Mingus and Charlie Parker."

Mathieu holds a bachelor's degree in classical guitar performance from George Mason University.

"I was teaching, I was performing," he says. "There's no way to prepare for a general career in music. With guitar, it's amazing what you can do, how you can make a living."

And it's true. Mathieu joined Ruthie and the Wranglers in 1997, but he also plays with the Kennedy Center's Opera House Orchestra, does freelance session work and performs solo, too. But it's the music for two guitars that's opened up a new horizon.

"I have a whole new attitude," Mathieu says. "Awareness of the instrument, appreciation.

"We want more people to appreciate music and the arts in general."

The Music in the Mansion Series resumes at 7:30 p.m. Saturday with Phil Mathieu and Giorgia Cavallaro's "American Music for Two Guitars," featuring the music of William Foden, in the Mansion at Strathmore, 10701 Rockville Pike, North Bethesda. Tickets are \$26, \$23 for seniors and \$15 for students. Call 301-581-5100.