

# GROUP EFF

**W**hen the Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) added a weeklong Guitar Summit—with its adjunct youth orchestra—to its offerings at the annual convention this past June, it gave national validation to what schools across the country already know: the classical guitar is a rising star, especially when played in multiples.

The emergence of the guitar orchestra, or ensemble (of 16 players or more) as they also are known, offers a new platform for the enjoyment of an instrument that has traditionally been a “solo” endeavor, or at most a foursome.

“There has been an explosion of guitar education across the USA,” says guitarist and educator Matt Denman, who since 2013 has been GFA’s director of education. A large part of what Denman does in his position is advise schools interested in establishing guitar orchestras.

“We’re a bunch of loners,” says Denman, of guitarists in general. “We spend a lot of time alone, and we like it. But we can also long for a musical experience with other like-minded individuals. That’s happening with thousands of students all over the country.” Denman adds that playing only guitars and doing so en masse “promotes art from a way not done before,” echoing sentiments by fans and educators in Austin, Texas; Clark County School District in Las Vegas; and Oklahoma City—where Denman teaches guitar at Oklahoma City University (OCU) and serves as director of the Celedonio Romero Guitar Institute there.

He knows of what he advises. His 26-member OCU Guitar Ensemble opened the Guitar Foundation of America’s 2015 convention and performed one of his compositions.

Yet nowhere is the surge in popularity more apparent than in Arizona, already ahead of the curve with its rich Latin culture and appreciation of the esteemed Spanish classical guitar. As one guitar aficionado quipped of Tucson, “It seems like we have a guitar festival year-round.”

## GUITAR HEAVEN

From all-guitar ensembles at schools to energized guitar societies and renowned college and university guitar programs, all of which offer public performances, Arizona is well-tuned for play. So much so that, almost on a



The 32 members of the Arizona Guitar Orchestra during rehearsal for its 2017 three-city tour. Center, kneeling, conductor Charles “Chuck” Hulihan. Far left, front row, José Luis Puerta, conductor of the Tucson Guitar Society Orchestra.

whim, it formed its own statewide guitar orchestra, aptly named the Arizona Guitar Orchestra, now in its fourth year.

The members of the orchestra are accomplished amateurs, some older or retired, but mostly young players associated with the orchestra’s four founders: the Grand Canyon Guitar Society in Flagstaff; the Tucson Guitar Society in partnership with the Bolton Guitar Studies Program at the University of Arizona; Glendale Community College near Phoenix; and Arizona State University in Tempe. Each of the

founders selected eight players for the orchestra of 32 who performed this season.

Granted, the orchestra’s season is short—three days, during which the group travels to and performs in Flagstaff, Tempe, and Tucson. This year the program featured the Grammy-winning Los Angeles Guitar Quartet (LAGQ), which was joined for the finale by the Arizona orchestra playing the world premiere of its commissioned piece from composer and former LAGQ member Andrew York, “By Chants.”

# ORT

Orchestra. “We consider this a partnership of the guitar culture in Arizona.”

From Hulihan’s perspective, the guitar is experiencing a “renaissance” at the high school level, and that enthusiasm for both the instrument and group performance is “trickling up” to the college level. “I truly believe it is the ‘trickle up’ that will make guitar ensembles mainstream 10 to 20 years from now,” says Hulihan. Besides, as younger players are discovering, “it’s more fun to play with other people.”

## MOVE OVER, FOOTBALL

The rising enthusiasm for guitar ensembles is bubbling over at Maryvale High School in Phoenix. Located in one of the poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city, the school is internationally known and honored for its Advanced Touring Guitar Ensemble.

The first high school guitar ensemble to be featured at the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) convention in 2008, the Maryvale ensemble has played concerts in Vienna, Austria, with the Vienna Boys Choir, and at the Pantheon in Rome. Its members have participated in the Arizona Guitar Orchestra; also noteworthy, 12 of the 26 players, sophomores to seniors, are girls, until recently a distinct minority in the guitar world.

The touring group represents only a portion of the students playing guitar at Maryvale: the program that James Yancey built now reaches 250 students enrolled in four of his beginning and intermediate classes.

Yancey’s work and results are so impressive the district has found the funds—along with outside fundraising efforts and benefactors—to purchase 300 quality guitars. Most are nylon-stringed classical instruments, but Yancey also has 60 steel-string acoustic guitars, six bass guitars, and three requinto and three contra guitars from Spain. The latter two would be a dream come true for any guitar orchestra or large ensemble, for the range of sound these cousins add to the all-guitar experience.

“Maryvale’s Touring Guitar is the varsity football team,” says Yancey, proudly elaborating, “They are the shining star on this campus.”

“Statistically speaking, band, orchestra, and choir are shrinking in school programs throughout the USA,” adds Yancey, who started the guitar program in 1999, a year after founding the school’s choral program. “Guitar is growing exponentially. It is becoming huge.”

Yancey teaches guitar like he taught choir: vocally. “I sing a lot for them. I demand that they make their instrument sing. Playing notes is not music. . . . Music comes from deep inside your soul.”

Student Diana Carreon, 18, a senior and conductor of the touring group, says Yancey “really helps the students understand how to



JOSE LUIS PUERTA

Inspired by York’s visit to the Grand Canyon and a centuries-old gambling dance from the native Havasupai, who live in the canyon’s depths, its name is a play on the “by chance” that wagering represents.

“We thought, why not, Arizona is way too small for us to not team up,” says Charles “Chuck” Hulihan, the orchestra’s conductor. Hulihan has been director of the award-winning guitar program at Glendale Community College since 1999 and is also director of the Guitar Foundation of America’s Youth Guitar

## Inside the classical guitar orchestra craze and its unlikely epicenter, Arizona

BY KAREN PETERSON



## TUCSON GUITAR ORCHESTRA

shape a phrase and in essence create great music. I love how well we work together as a group, and we all have the same goal, which is playing some wonderful music and expressing that to others.”

### OPEN TO ALL

José Luis Puerta, director of education and conductor of the Tucson Guitar Society’s Tucson Guitar Orchestra (TGO), is no stranger to guitar-only ensembles. Growing up in Puerto Rico, as a youth he attended Escuela Libre de Musica, where participation in large ensembles was mandatory.

Large ensembles and full orchestras give students “a sense of belonging,” says Puerta, who recently received his doctorate in guitar performance and ethnomusicology from the Bolton Guitar Studies Program at the University of Arizona. And ensembles like the TGO, which performs throughout the year and includes high school and college-age players, give students of all skill levels a chance to participate.

“Even if you are not the greatest player, there is a part for you in an ensemble,” says Puerta, a TGO member before he was tapped four years ago to be its conductor and artistic director.

Guitar orchestras also provide young

guitarists with a sense of accomplishment. “They start the semester saying, ‘This is too hard, it’s not going to happen.’ Then they begin to see progress,” says Puerta.

For Puerta, an educator and performer, the role of conductor has expanded his understanding of making music. “For the conductor, the orchestra is an instrument: to make 30 sound like one is harder than it looks,” he jokes, sort of.

For the guitarists, the primary challenge is having a conductor at all, let alone having to follow his lead—looking down at their hands, not up at a person, is their norm.

“There is a lot of back and forth between the player and the conductor—a lot of communication—and that’s difficult to teach,” says Puerta, adding that it comes down to “trusting each other.”

And performance, he advises, is about “trusting yourself and having fun. I tell [players] not to worry. If their fingering and phrasing is solid, all will come together.”

### MESSAGE OF HOPE

Fingering and phrasing did come together April 2 in Tucson, where the Arizona Guitar Orchestra played its last performance of the season, and breezed through the challenges of the exotic “By Chants” in its finale with the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet.

LAGQ’s William Kanengiser, who played the role of the shaman in York’s Arizona-influenced composition—“It’s very cool to play music inspired by the landscape,” he says—is no stranger to the Arizona Guitar Orchestra, or to Craig Yarbrough, executive director of the Grand Canyon Guitar Society in Flagstaff.

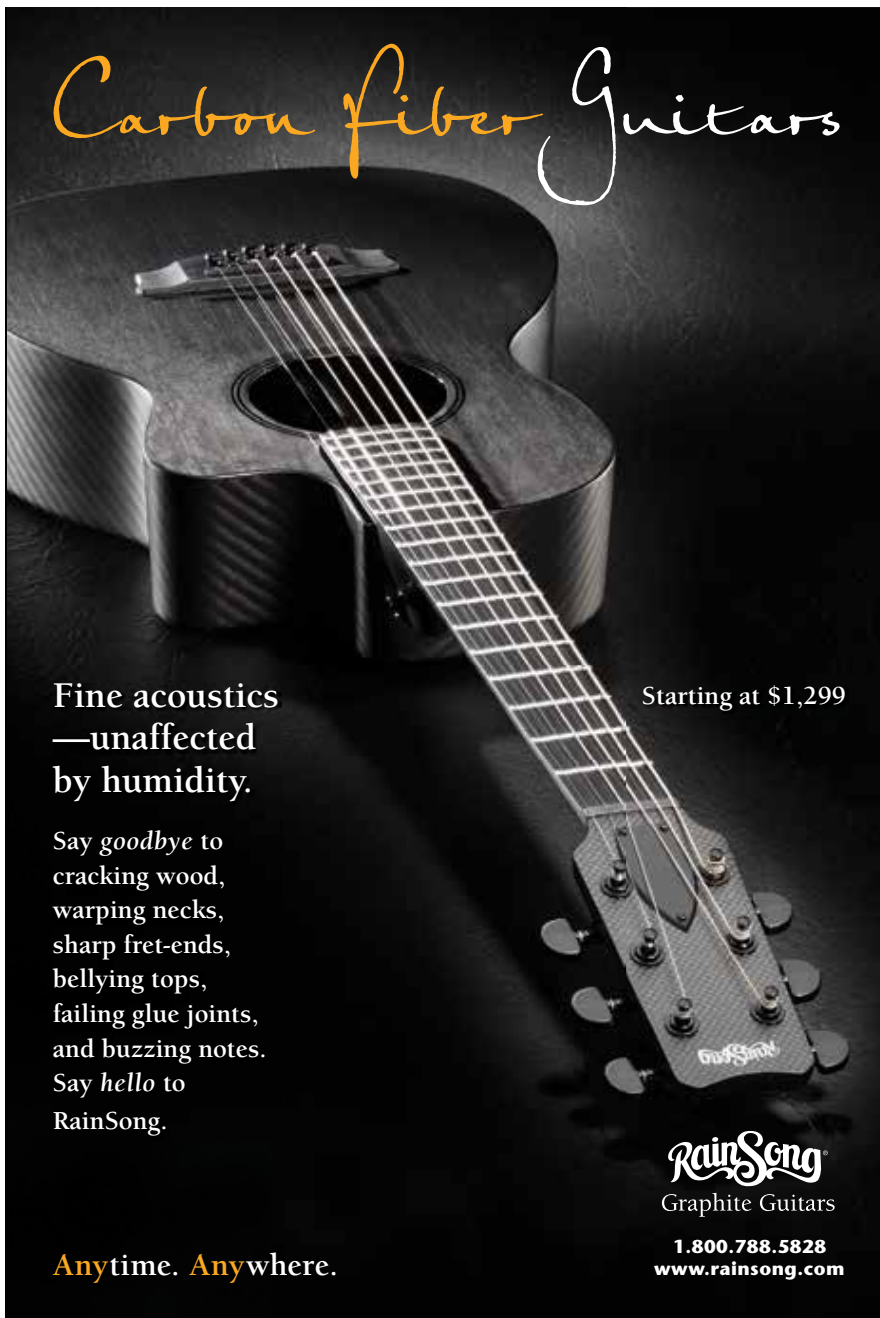
Four years ago, the two friends were ruminating about the LAGQ’s fascination with a piece that was written for Kanengiser by Japanese composer Shingo Fujii, *Concierto de Los Angeles* for solo and guitar orchestra.

“We said, ‘Let’s do the piece and take it on the road,’” says Kanengiser, and they did, in 2014, in an ad hoc collaboration with the state’s tightly knit guitar community.

The Arizona Guitar Orchestra was born—and participating in it was Kanengiser’s first experience with a full guitar orchestra. “We rehearsed together, toured together, hung out together. There was a bonding between orchestra members,” he says.

Kanengiser’s take-away from the experience—guitar orchestras are “a metaphor for the human endeavor.” At their core, he says, they express the “hopeful message of passing along a tradition from older players to a younger generation, not on YouTube but [through] a physical experience together. The benefit of that conversation for younger players is enormous.”

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