

Booker High students benefit from classical guitarist's background

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It's hard to believe that classical guitar virtuoso Thomas Koch, who has built an extensive repertoire and performed all over the world, including at the L'Eglise Saint-Merri in Paris and Carnegie Music Hall in New York City, did not fall in love with the instrument at first sight.

Koch, the classical guitar teacher at Booker High School and founder of Guitar Sarasota, has been playing guitar for more than 40 years and has received outstanding reviews for his live performances and recordings, including his CD *Souvenir de Paris*. Yet, the fiery German-born instructor admits that when he started playing guitar at age 11, he was not immediately smitten by it.

"In the beginning, I thought guitar was just OK," he said. "I'd say for the first two years I was not outstanding. I was hanging on for two years, making progress but not really feeling it."

For the past few months, Koch has been preparing his students for the String Fling concert at Booker High School tonight at 7 p.m. It will feature his guitar ensemble playing an array of music, ranging from Spanish music to the Beatles to Michael Jackson. It will also feature a violin orchestra, directed by Nathan Frantz, and piano directed by Sung Choe.

Koch, born in Remscheid, was raised in Wermelskirchen. He originally wanted to become a chemist. That changed when he discovered his desire to play guitar through the popular rock music of his day. Koch was a huge fan of the English rock band T. Rex, specifically its lead singer Marc Bolan.

This inspired him to take guitar lessons with his first teacher, Franz- Joseph Petri.

“I was waiting to play the T. Rex songs. But after two years I actually liked it enough to actually like what I was playing,” he said. “I remember vividly the first two songs that I played that I actually liked. I played them and practiced them for myself and not just because my teacher told me to do it.”

By high school, when he figured it was time to start thinking about what he really wanted to do with his life, he dropped the idea of becoming a chemist and pursued guitar. For his bachelor’s degree, he attended Hochschule fur Musik where he received a teaching and performance degree, and for his master’s he attended Theater Hannover, where he pursued a performance degree.

Koch soon found himself in Paris, where he lived 12 years, studied a bit more and found a job. He soon met a young girl from Sarasota who would later become his wife, Jen Ahearn-Koch. When they were married and their first child was born, they moved to Sarasota and have been here since 1996.

Without music and fate, he said, “I would have probably become a chemist and stayed in Germany all my life.”

Koch is a part of the guitar, viola, and flute group Trio Voila and works as the founding president of Guitar Sarasota. The classical guitar society was founded 11 years ago by Koch and his wife, and four friends.

“We organize concerts and master classes. We want to inform people of the beauty of the guitar. In Sarasota, there is so much art culture, but no one was taking care of the guitar; it had no platform,” he said.

While he teaches privately, he also teaches at Booker High School, where he has taught guitar for more than a decade. He believes that his students must learn to appreciate the instrument and to express themselves through music.

“If I don’t practice guitar for myself, I start to feel grumpy. I care very much about how my students play, but I have to remind myself how hard it is to develop criterias of your playing,” he said. “Being able to express those judgments with a solid foundation. With everything that is artsy, you have to be fine with being with yourself and the art.”

Koch said he is proud of teaching music and helping his students at Booker High.

“The fact that everyone actually has an opportunity, especially at Booker, is outstanding. I find it to be very unique. The only thing I did in high school was sing in a choir once a week,” he said. “You guys have it all, and you should take advantage of it.”