

Michael Nix dives deep in 'Barton Cove'

Banjar innovator's CD release party is Friday

Michael Nix is one of the most versatile, accomplished musicians living and working in our area.

We don't have room here to list all his achievements, but here is the abridged version:

He is a solo artist who performs on guitar, lute, banjo and mandolin. He has played throughout the United States and Asia. He also performs world chamber music as part of the trio Pioneer

Consort. In addition, Nix is an established teacher, providing private lessons as well as teaching composition and music theory at the college level. He also works as a composer of solo music, songs, chamber music, symphonic work, electronic music and opera.

You can also add inventor to the list. Nix recently recorded a CD of compositions called "Barton Cove," which is a popular Franklin County spot on the Connecticut River. The instrument he plays is the the banjar, which he designed. To celebrate the release of the CD, Nix will hold a concert and chocolate reception in the Great Hall at the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls on Friday, Dec 14, at 7 p.m.

To learn more about the banjar, see our CD review on this page and visit Nix's Web site at www.nixworks.com. The site includes a documentary film that Leor Brenman made this past year and that has



Sheryl Hunter

Sounds Local

Listeners will discover a simmering versatility

By RICHIE DAVIS
Recorder Staff

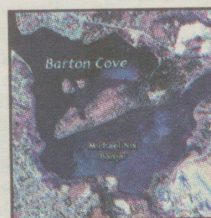
Anyone who has ever launched a boat at Barton Cove and let it roll and rock quietly to the gentle waves knows the shimmering of sunlight against the water, the blend of breezes and lapping sounds, as well as the rhythmic pitch and yaw, that play with the vessel, almost as if it was a musical instrument.

Barton Cove has a constantly changing landscape that can leave you surprised at any moment by an entirely new perspective, awakening you to the illusion that you're in a totally new place.

That's just the effect Greenfield guitarist, banjo master and composer Michael Nix has with a three-minute work, "Barton Cove." It's the title track of a new recording featuring a new instrument. And it demonstrates not only his abilities as a composer, arranger and musician — but also the versatility of the instrument he created to combine the timbres of the banjo, classical guitar and lute.

Nix's composition — along with a rich mix of material from J.S. Bach and 17th-century Spanish composer Gaspar Sanz to the George Gershwin and George Harrison, Turlough O'Carolan and Stephen Foster — gives the listener an earful of the shimmering high tones and low notes, rich textures and shining reso-

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been submitted to various film festivals. The CD "Barton Cove" can be purchased at the site as well as at the Discovery Center gift shop and other local venues.

The Great Falls Discovery Center is located at 2 Avenue A, Turners Falls. The suggested donation is \$6 to \$12. For more information, (413) 863-3221.

"In the Wrist" CD release at PACE Saturday

The Performing Arts Center of Easthampton, better known as PACE, is about to celebrate its fifth anniversary. To help mark the occasion, it has released a new CD called "In the Wrist." This disc features the vocals of Julia Suriano, a

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nance of the seven-string banjar.

Nix had the instrument made for him following a 2002 concert surveying banjo styles. The result was the banjar, which he introduced in a concert in March in 2004 Turners Falls.

In his research, the 53-year-old multi-instrumentalist found a seven-string banjo was developed in the mid-1800s in Great Britain, called the "zither banjo." The arrangement he uses for "International Jig" is based on one he found for that instrument, which had sheepgut strings.

The banjar he designed — with an open back so that he could change the tone from phrase to phrase if need be by how he holds it against his body — is tuned so that he can reach down to a low C, imitating the deep sound of a cello.

"I wanted the mystery of that low C or D, of the low membrane," Nix said. The 19th-century "International Jig" arrangement he found uses two seven-string banjos to get the range that he manages to with one instrument.

What Nix envisioned for his banjar — the historical name of the banjo itself and a reference to a hybridized banjo-guitar — was the clear separation of voices that you get with a lute, with a harp-like "sweet sound" and the woody tone of a banjo, but louder.

What made it all possible was a set of high-tension nylon strings and a 12-inch tunable timpani head, which could isolate the pitch he wanted.

"I thought very hard about the physics of this instrument to be able to achieve the sound I wanted," said Nix, who was dissatisfied with the way the original wooden bridge supporting the strings allowed a lot of cross vibration of the strings. So, with the help of someone from the Leeds Guitarmaker's School, he designed a bridge to sustain the bass and tone of a classical guitar, and retain the sweet openness of the banjo.

"I play polyphonically, so I needed for each string to be heard out of the mix of all the other strings, so that I can control all of the voices because I play two, three, four, sometimes all the voices simultaneously," he says.

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"You have to hear all of them clearly."

Nix, a classically trained guitarist who earned his bachelor's degree in guitar performance and taught at Keene State College before moving to Greenfield to work on a graduate composition degree from the University of Massachusetts, says he's a bit of a "mad scientist" in the way he approaches bringing "a bit of this and that" in his arrangements, in his concert programming — and now in the instruments he performs on (including mandolin and lute.)

"Barton Cove" is also a display of his mixing of styles — almost with one finger in the past, one in the future — to display the range of this instrument. The title song, for instance, displays a classical guitar arpeggio, but beyond the parameters of what he's done before.

Part of his "finding new ways to do old things" takes him to Stephen Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer," along with two other well-known songs by the 19th-century American composer, with a sweeping arpeggio of a 1940s piano arrangement adapted for the banjar.

Nix, who always likes to be at the nexus of emotional and intellectual challenge in his art, adds, "I like to be at a confluence of styles."

The banjar is the artistic next step for Nix, in part to differentiate himself from hundreds of other classical guitarists. His renditions of Harrison's "Something" and Gershwin's "Summertime" on this CD, along with his own "Spanish Fandango Variations" and various classical and traditional selections, take the listener along on a new voyage with a completely different musical vessel.

On the Web: www.nixworks.com

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