

## VERSATILE VIRTUOSO

### Guitarist grooves to the music of Bach and Hendrix

By BRADLEY BAMBARGER

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK --

Many virtuosos become virtuosos because they hone their world down not only to their specific instrument but to their particular genre. Guitarist Benjamin Verdery is not that kind of virtuoso.

Verdery's musical horizon is wide. An hour-long conversation with him -- apropos of his recital Saturday at Manhattan's 92nd Street Y -- runs from J.S. Bach to Jimi Hendrix, from contemporary composers to Brooklyn indie-rock band the National. The 53-year-old credits early FM radio.

"The world is more compartmentalized now, but when I grew up in the '60s and early '70s, radio was color-blind, genre-blind," Verdery says. "You'd hear Bob Dylan after Aretha Franklin, the Beatles before James Brown. That shaped my ideal of listening even into my classical career."

Even Verdery's classical-guitar hero -- Julian Bream -- was famously keen on gypsy jazz and Indian classical, as well as enamored of Benjamin Britten alongside Bach. Bream "embraced music as a whole," he says, adding that the great Englishman also had an inspiring trait in common with another of Verdery's guitar heroes, Jimi Hendrix: "Bream was as much of a colorist on classical guitar as Hendrix was on electric."

On Saturday, Verdery will likely play one of his Hendrix arrangements as an encore (which he recorded on his excellent 2006 solo album, "Branches"). The main program will include two of Verdery's own compositions, plus Bach's majestic Chaconne and Verdery's version of Johann Strauss's waltz "On the Beautiful Blue Danube." The guitarist -- who is chair of Yale University's guitar department -- will also play a set of Schumann-esque miniatures by a Yale colleague, Martin Bresnick. And Bresnick features again with his arrangements of two pieces from Janacek's lyrical solo piano collection "On an Overgrown Path," which Verdery describes as "special, real poems."

#### PROGRAM:

VERDERY: Satyagraha

BACH: Chaconne in D minor, BWV 1004

MARSHALL: New Work for Flute & Guitar  
[world premiere]

VERDERY: Tears for Peace

BRESNICK: Joaquin is Dreaming

[NY premiere written for Benjamin Verdery]

JANACEK: A Faded Leaf from

On an Overgrown Path (arr. Bresnick)

JANACEK: The Virgin Mary of Frydek from

On an Overgrown Path (arr. Bresnick)

STRAUSS: Blue Danube Waltz (arr. Verdery)

The recital's centerpiece will be the premiere of a Balinese-accented work by Ingram Marshall, "The Mentioning of Love," which will also feature Verdery's wife, Rie Schmidt, on alto flute. It's the fourth piece Marshall has written for Verdery and includes hints of the double concerto for classical and electric guitars the composer wrote for Verdery and Police man Andy Summers that the pair premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2004.

Verdery, who has collaborated on record with guitarists from classical (John Williams) to Celtic (Bill Coulter), recently released a duo album with Summers, "First You Build a Cloud." Summers is a longtime Verdery fan.

"Ben is a phenomenal player -- but he's also someone with highly original, off-the-wall ideas about music," Summers says. "He not only can do a fantastic arrangement of 'The Blue Danube' for six-string guitar; he can also radically de-tune a twelve-string, play it with chopsticks and turn it into an orchestra from another planet."

Verdery, a Connecticut native, is a longtime resident of the Upper West Side, just across town from the 92nd Street Y, where he is curator of "The Art of the Guitar" series. Even with his starry collaborations, top-composer connections and Ivy League position, Verdery remains a genial, humble soul ("you can always be a better teacher," he muses at one point). But he is sure that his recitals aren't just for guitar geeks -- "I think any music lover new to classical guitar would be thrilled by the instrument's possibilities."

Verdery himself is endlessly enthused by different sounds, whether he comes upon them on a trip to Estonia or walking a Manhattan street. On the way home from the dentist just before this interview, he passed a busker playing the harp-like African kora -- "and, man, I'm totally into the kora."