

JoAnn Falletta

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A national treasure

By Tom Steel
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The term "National Treasure" is bestowed upon and awarded to those usually serving honor for scientific, anthropological and artistic achievements whereby betterment of society is of more importance than personal glory.

One such treasure is connected to Hampton Roads area of Virginia and that is JoAnn Falletta, Music Director of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, as well as the Buffalo Philharmonic. The Maestro, during her long tenures with both orchestras, has greatly raised the bar on performance standards while gaining greater national recognition for her colleagues. Recordings she has made for the very successful Naxos label, in particular with the VSO, BPO, Ulster and London symphonies, are themselves having garnered great reviews and accolades from the musical community and public.

To sit in on a Falletta live concert performance is to be transported to musical Nirvana. Because of this, she is consequently in global demand as guest conductor by orchestras from all points of the compass which makes her not only a world traveler but also a potent global ambassador for classical music. She is recipient of many awards including Grammys pertaining to her commitment and

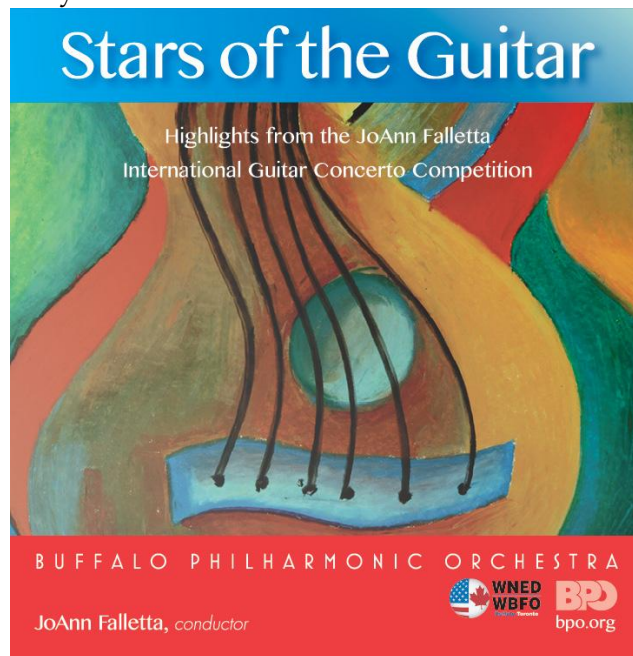
contribution to the arts and humanities in both locales.

These are well deserved and very numerous.

However, if there is a pinnacle of respected awards, it could probably be that which she will receive on Oct. 8 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is to be inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences which states in its 1780 charter the purpose "to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity and happiness of a free, independent and virtuous people." Sounds just like the Maestro's

philosophy of life and whose response was very self-effacing considering some of her fellow inductees, such as Ben Franklin, George Washington, the Adams boys, Sam and John, along with fellow musicians, by saying "I am delighted and deeply honored to join such illustrious colleagues at the Academy. The election is a resounding expression of the validity of classical music and symphony orchestras in our country."

The sentiment of this philosophy was stated in an interview with this reviewer in 2012 when Falletta said her goal is "to help young people to understand that (music) is their legacy. That they well know that concerts are thrilling, learning and



inspiring experiences – that they will feel comfortable in the concert hall and that they carry the music with them.” Those are the words of a musical visionary whose does not rest on her laurels but puts words into action, not only expressing the very rich field of classical music but also exploring new music and educating audiences.

One such project that clearly is close to the Maestro’s heart is the “JoAnn Falletta International Guitar Competition” which was founded in 2004 by PBS stations WNED-FM, WNED-TV and the Buffalo Philharmonic. It was named in honor of the Philharmonic’s music director. Very aptly too, for she has been playing the guitar since she was seven years old; she is a very accomplished performer and soloist. In a 2008 interview she said, “The guitar takes me back to my musical roots. It was the focus of my life and is a more intimate way of making music.”

The competition is held bi-annually, attracting competitors from around the world, and has become an excitingly popular draw. This brings us to a double CD release, titled “Stars of the Guitar,” is a compilation of past competition performances that will be much appreciated by other than guitar aficionados. The composers make an interesting comparison.

They include Rodrigo/Spanish, Ponce/Mexican, Villa-Lobos/Brazil, Sierra/Puerto Rico, Brouwer/Cuban and Castelnuovo-Tedesco/ Italy: a pretty diverse selection of musical works. Probably the most recognizable name on that list would be Rodrigo whose “Concerto to de Aranjuez” and “Fantasia para un Gentilhombre”

are included on these discs with the latter exquisitely and genteelly rendered by Ekachal Jearakul. From the start what is noticeable is the masterly and delicately “polite” yet attentive accompaniment from the BPO under the Maestro’s direction, coupled with a very good recording that places guitar and orchestra in a very believable, warm and enjoyable acoustic.

There is so much wonderful music to enjoy on these discs that there a space for only a brief mention. For example, Sierra’s “Folias” results in a display of knuckle breaking virtuosity from Celil Refik Kaya, who by the way will be performing Ponce’s “Guitar Concerto” with the VSO and Ms. Falletta at the Ferguson Center for the Arts on Oct. 21. The Castelnuovo-Tedesco “Concerto” begins ever so classically and if Mozart or Hayden had written a guitar concerto, it could probably have sounded like this which paved the way for a most enjoyable 20 minutes delight from Benjamin Beirs. As a matter of fact, there is a Haydn “Guitar Concerto” which is actually a transcription of his First Cello Concerto.

The JoAnn Falletta International Guitar Competition is a fitting tribute to a very gifted, warm and humble human being and aside from the excellent soloists, the Buffalo Philharmonic acquits itself with taste and alacrity, never intrusive with the silences as important as the music. But don’t take this reviewer’s word for it: purchase these discs and find out that the proof of the pudding is the “hearing.”