

Classical musician to return with performance

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

Derek Brown, a 1991 graduate of Wallowa High school, today is a trained classical and Flamenco guitarist. He will perform a concert at Stein Distillery in Joseph at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 12.

Like most classical musicians, Brown got his musical start early. In the fourth or fifth grade, Brown moved with his parents from La Grande to Wallowa.

On his ninth birthday his parents offered him the opportunity to take guitar lessons from a La Grande instructor once a week and even buy him a guitar if he committed himself to the lessons and practicing.

Both sides kept their word. Brown's instructor was a college student and the son of a Spanish classical guitarist. Brown said his parents also constantly played records from the '50s and '60s around the house.

"Music was always around, and I felt a strong connection to it," he said. "I also felt supported by my family if I wanted to spend a lot of time doing that — they wanted me to follow that dream."

Brown kept up his interest in guitar through school even though he had a keen interest in sports as well. His parents and music teachers also reminded him that he would get out of music what he put into it.

"I knew if I wanted to get better at it and improve and be able to play the kind of music that interested me, that I was going to have to put time into it," he said. He also said that although he sometimes held sports as a top priority, the guitar was still on his mind.

After he graduated, his parents decided to move back to La Grande, and guitar again became the top priority. He found another instructor and took lessons not only as part of his course work, but also, on the side, often practicing 4-6 hours per day. He also became interested in the theory aspect of guitar.

"I didn't really understand music theory on the level I needed to pursue high levels of perfor-



Jose Pita Juarez www.josepitavisuals.com

Guitarist Derek Brown

mance, so I was looking for instructors to teach me the fret board," he said. "I decided that music was the thing I was most passionate about and the thing that brings me the most joy, and it's a giant world I could spend my whole life in and never fully explore."

He also noted he was not discouraged by parents or teachers from listening to pop or rock music. He even started learning harmonic structure from Beatles' songs. He really dedicated him-

self to classical in high school after someone gave him a CD of pieces played by classical music guitar legend Andres Segovia.

"You'd listen to him play and think it was two or three different people at the same time," Brown said. "It was another level of musicianship, and it hit me deeper than anything I'd ever heard."

Brown was attending EOU part-time and working part-time without a clear vision of what he wanted to do. After speaking with

some mentors, he ended up transferring to Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton where he got a good grounding in music theory and eventually obtained an associate's degree in music. Brown called it a very positive experience.

The guitarist transferred to Pacific University in the mid-'90s and met instructor David Franzen, an accomplished classical and Flamenco player. Brown knew he'd found the right place and instructor. He obtained his undergraduate degree in classical guitar performance and eventually earned a master's degree in teaching at Pacific as well.

Brown spent a number of years as a public school music teacher while still studying with Franzen and pursuing guitar. He eventually received a doctorate in education from George Fox University and moved over to the administration side of education while still pursuing his music interests and teaching private students and groups of master students as well.

He spent last summer in Italy on a guitar project and even had a chance to audition and play for classical music guitarist Pepe Romero, who gave him some feedback.

These days, Brown works as a school administrator on the west side of the state, which keeps him busy, but not too busy to ignore music.

"It's a busy job, and I end up carving out time in the morning and evening to practice, teach and record and guitar-related things — it gives me balance," he said. He plays mainly classical with a Spanish flavor although he also plays some classical Celtic music as well.

"The stuff I like to play, you have to play every day," Brown said. "I keep a weekly schedule of what technical things I'm going to practice and what pieces I'm going to play through," he said. "It feels good to decompress and relax and give yourself that space to enjoy something that you love."

Brown has won numerous awards for his playing. He is a member of the Pacific University Music Hall of Fame and a 2019

Volterra Project laureate which earned him the trip to Italy.

"In the last five or 10 years I've tried to be a little more purposeful and intentional about trying to grow and seeking opportunities to learn more," he said. He still takes lessons from other masters and tries to keep expanding his repertoire.

The guitarist has also developed an interest in lutherie (constructing musical instruments, especially of wood, including guitars), starting when he used the experience of helping a luthier build a classical guitar as his thesis project for graduation in the '90s.

"Growing up in Wallowa, I took a lot of classes in woodshop and felt comfortable around tools," he said. "That space feels good, working with your hands and making something."

The experience stuck with him, and in 2018, he spent the summer in Granada, Spain, building another guitar, which he said was a much deeper experience, working every day and learning construction procedures from beginning to end.

"It changed how I play and interpret Spanish music," he said. Brown added that he will play most of the music at his Stein's engagement on that guitar.

Even after the years away, Brown still misses the Wallowa Valley. His mother lives in Joseph.

"I'm trying to find more time to visit my mom," he said. "We try to get up here two or three times a year. We've even talked about relocating back there. I still have a lot of friends, so it's not out of the realm of possibility."

Brown hasn't played in the valley since he was a college student doing informal concerts in order to practice for recitals.

"I'm really excited that the folks at Stein's and some others have helped coordinate making that happen. I'm happy to come up and talk about the music and talk about the guitar building stuff as well — whatever folks are interested in."

Stein Distillery is located at 604 N. Main St. in Joseph, and Brown will start at 1 p.m.

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