

Creative Living

celebrating all good things

Tale of two champions

Guitarists Muriel Anderson and Helen Avakian will display their winning styles at the Towne Crier.

by Kate Goldsmith

**Muriel Anderson
also Helen Avakian
Friday, May 22, 8:30 p.m.
Towne Crier Café
379 Main St., Beacon
Tickets \$20 advance, \$25 door
(845) 855-1300 • www.townecrier.com**

What are the chances of the only two female fingerstyle guitar champions in the world performing on the same bill in Beacon, New York?

Pretty good, as it happens.

Muriel Anderson and Helen Avakian will share the Towne Crier stage this Friday evening, demonstrating why they are among the best of the best. Each will perform a solo set and then join forces for a few tunes.

A longstanding popular presence on the Hudson Valley music scene, Avakian is an accomplished singer-songwriter who was voted No. 1 Favorite Acoustic Act four times by Rhythm and News magazine and has won numerous songwriting awards. Comfortable in a variety of musical settings, for several years she was accompanist for Bard College's flamenco dance program and taught guitar at Marist College and Dutchess Community College; and has performed classical compositions with long-time partner Terry Champlin.

When she began competing in fingerstyle contests, Avakian took her playing to yet another level.

"When I first tried it [competing] I didn't know what to expect. There's some absolutely phenomenal players," she said. "It became kind of an addiction. It helped me get a lot better, and I met a lot of people."

In 2013, she finished in the Top 5 at the International Fingerstyle Guitar Championship at the Walnut Valley acoustic music festival in Kansas. Last year, she took it to the top, becoming the first woman to win since the competition went international in 2004, and the second since Muriel Anderson won in 1989, when it was called the National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship.

Her winning pieces were "Zambra," a traditional flamenco composition; and an arrangement of Jay Ungar's "Ashokan Farewell," known to millions as the theme from Ken Burns' PBS series, "The Civil War."

Ungar's haunting tune stood out from the material presented by the other finalists, she said.

"Apparently, people thought it might have helped me," she said. "It's a very quiet piece; the other finalists had flashier pieces."

Avakian used her prize money to fund her latest album, "Notes from Helen," featuring 12 instrumentals that showcase her diversity and virtuosity. "Zambra" and "Ashokan Farewell" appear, as well as

compositions by Ralph Towner, George Gershwin, Stevie Wonder, Lennon & McCartney and Avakian, herself. There's also a dual-guitar arrangement by Peter Huttlinger of the traditional "Monaghan Jig," with a guest performance by Huttlinger.

As an arranger, Avakian takes songs that she loves, listens carefully to all the parts and transcribes them.

"After that I often will give it to a guitar ensemble I am working with. This gives me a chance to see how the parts fit together and sound on guitar," she said. "That leads to tweaking the arrangement, fixing problems and maybe getting a new idea or two. Then I figure out how to fit it all on one guitar as effectively as I can."

She records throughout the process, too, "so I can listen from more of an outsider observer point of view." The performance process tweaks the piece further until a "standardized" version emerges.

Avakian relocated from Dutchess County to Madison, Wis., last year but visits the area frequently.

"[Madison] is nice. It's different. It's interesting," she said. "People are friendly. It's amazing now: I used to have to drive everywhere; now I can walk to the library, to [get coffee]. I feel like I'm still transitioning, getting to know the area. So far, so good."

Avakian met Muriel Anderson in 2012 but had admired her long before that.

"I first read about Muriel in Acoustic Guitar magazine and other publications, and I was intrigued. That is also where I learned about the Fingerstyle Championship," she said. "Then I heard recordings of Muriel and was impressed. Finally, I had the chance to attend her performance at the Indiana Fingerstyle Guitar Festival, and I was blown away!"

Avakian and Anderson performed together once before, at the Hyde Park Library Annex.

"It is amazing to be in concert with her; a dream," said Avakian.

Anderson has good things to say about Avakian, as well.

"She's straight-ahead fingerstyle and very accomplished. Very secure in her playing, and a good singer, too," Anderson said. "It's nice to see another woman really going for excellence in their playing, and I think we're going to see more of that."

Asked how it felt to finally have some company at the top, Anderson said she was proud of Avakian's accomplishment.

"People cite[d] me as the only woman to win the championship, and I always [said], 'So far!'" she said.

Anderson took up the guitar at age 8. The third-grader's first gig was for her classmates, a performance that included the blues standard "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

Doc Watson was Anderson's first guitar hero. Her guitar teacher, Anne Jones, rec-



Fingerstyle Guitar Champions Muriel Anderson (holding a harp guitar) and Helen Avakian will perform at the Towne Crier in Beacon this Friday evening. Photo courtesy Helen Avakian

ommended young Muriel's parents buy her one of Watson's album for Christmas.

"I remember running home from school to learn every song from that album," said Anderson, an Illinois native who now lives in Nashville.

Anderson eventually recorded with her hero and made music with other legends including Chet Atkins and Les Paul.

A singer and prolific composer for acoustic and harp guitar, Anderson has 10 CDs and several instructional DVDs to her credit. Her latest recording is the double-CD "Nightlight Daylight," which features the first interactive lighted CD cover and contributions from Victor Wooten, Phil Keaggy, Mark Kibble of Take 6, Danny Gottlieb, Stanley Jordan, Tommy Emmanuel, Earl Klugh, Howard Levy, Jeff Coffin, Tierra Negra and members of the Nashville Symphony.

"People are really feeling the love and joy that went into making it," said Anderson, who describes the package as "one [disc] to go to sleep to, one to wake up to."

As an arranger, Anderson has different approaches for different songs, but always takes note of what she finds most striking about the tune.

"It can be the phrasing of the singer, the timing of the piano player, the nuances of the chords, and so I really try ... to capture that," she said. "It's more about capturing the magic of that tune, rather than just the notes. That's what really makes the song."

She is the host and founder of Muriel Anderson's All Star Guitar Night, which brings together some of the world's finest guitarists to raise money for youth music education. Many of Anderson's concerts benefit the Music for Life Alliance, a non-

profit organization she founded to facilitate funding for this purpose.

The story behind the Alliance began in 1998, when a string of crime in Anderson's community was attributed to young people on drugs. She approached city leaders about the problem, which they blamed on arts programs being cut back in the schools. Digging further, Anderson became aware of many small organizations that were already addressing this need in poorer school districts around the country. Her thought was to create an organization to support programs that were already in place.

On her website, murielanderson.com, she wrote: "My vision was two-fold; first, I wanted to collect instruments for music programs in need; and second, I wanted to create a national database, giving grants and recognition to organizations making a difference in the lives of children through music."

A true Renaissance woman, Anderson has published articles in *Guitar Player*, *Acoustic Guitar*, *Fingerstyle Guitar*, *Classical Guitar* and *Frets* magazines, and is currently a regular columnist for *Acoustic Guitar Japan* magazine. She is a regular guest instructor for Truefire and at guitar workshops across the country. Anderson also has a YouTube channel, where there are clips from live performances as well as instructional material.

Visitors to her website can click on "Nightlight" from the top menu and download a free bonus track, "What the World Needs Now is Love," a duet with Phil Keaggy.

Anderson and Avakian will sell their CDs at the Towne Crier show. To learn more about the artists, visit murielander.com and www.helenavakian.com. ❖