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Expansionist in the Realm of the Guitar

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Frederic Hand, who studied with Julian Bream, on lute.

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Celebrations of composers' birthdays are easily done: if you've played their music, you've paid tribute to them in the best possible way. Celebrating a performer is harder. The things that make a performer special — a particular approach to sound, an identifiable way of turning a phrase or a special measure of eloquence in a certain repertory — are by definition nontransferable. And performances based on another performer's style are never very satisfying.

The 75th-birthday tribute to the great English guitarist and lutenist Julian Bream at the 92nd Street Y on Saturday evening avoided those pitfalls, partly because the six musicians made no effort to parrot Mr. Bream's style. But mainly this tribute worked because Mr. Bream's contributions went beyond performance. He expanded the guitar and lute repertoires by commissioning works from renowned composers, making transcriptions and reviving pieces that

had been forgotten for centuries. (Mr. Bream, who lives in Dorset, England, and stopped touring in 2002, did not attend.)

The program began with a lute set. Frederic Hand did the honors, opening with a brisk, clean-lined account of two selections from Tielman Susato's "Danseyre," and including a beautifully phrased, introspective reading of Dowland's "Melancholy Galliard" and a zesty performance of an anonymous favorite, "Kemp's Jig." Mr. Hand, who studied with Mr. Bream, ended his set with the premiere of "For Julian," a lute work he composed for the occasion built of themes in an Elizabethan style, with contemporary harmonic and rhythmic touches.

David Tanenbaum and Benjamin Verdery devoted their sections of the program to works Mr. Bream commissioned. Mr. Tanenbaum's fluent, warm-toned performance of Takemitsu's "All in Twilight" (1987) brought out the gentle dissonances and carefully etched themes that make this composer's atmospheric late works so appealing.

Still, Mr. Verdery had more to work with: Britten's "Nocturnal" (1963), the greatest of Mr. Bream's acquisitions, is a set of variations on Dowland's "Come, Heavy Sleep," with the theme heard unadorned only at the end. Mr. Bream's performances of the work were virtuosic but ruminative. Mr. Verdery was more assertive, but his crisp, sharply defined textures and slightly impetuous phrasing suited the restless quality of Britten's elaboration on Dowland's dark theme.

Mr. Bream commissioned enough first-rate works that the program could have been devoted exclusively to them. But the players wanted to offer standard repertory works to which Mr. Bream was partial as well. David Leisner contributed a poetic traversal of the five Villa-Lobos Preludes. William Kanengiser played works by Falla, and Scott Tennant gave a soulful, gracefully articulated performance of Rodrigo's "En los Trigales."