



Beyond Science & Business

Celebrating Roche People - April and May 2009

Individual Accomplishment

Roche Scientists Partner through Art and Music

By the day they search for medical cures at Roche, but off-time, Galina Kourteva, Ph.D., owns a fine art gallery where fellow researcher John Olson, Ph.D., who heads the New York City Classical Guitar Society, has performed to much acclaim.

As haunting guitar tones resonated through **Alfa Art Gallery**, listeners were brought on a journey. Not through the more traditional themes of love or peace - although they figured into the story - but of science.

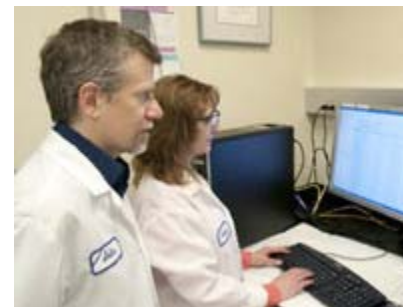
John Olson, Ph.D., deftly worked the strings of his classical guitar while his wife, Gioia De Cari, sang a short, eloquent verse capturing the evolution of the existence of life on earth from a prehistoric broth of molecules. Over the course of the performance, they moved through texts by several renowned scientists, including Albert Einstein, arranged and set to music in the form of a traditional Christian mass.

The unique and striking piece was the duo's premiere of *Abyss of the Stars: A Mass for Voice and Guitar* - the first in what is becoming a flourishing **Science/Music Commissioning Project** they launched to further public understanding and convey the beauty of scientific discovery through song.

"The arts can move people in ways that lectures and data cannot," explained John, research leader in RNA Therapeutics. "Science has not traditionally been a subject or source of inspiration for music. But the insights of science - evolution, quantum theory, the Big Bang, the structure of DNA and so on - are beautiful, inspiring and worth celebrating."

It's fitting that *Abyss* was played at Alfa Art Gallery, a popular new arts hub opened in New Brunswick, N.J., in early 2008 by Galina Kourteva, Ph.D., with her husband, fine artist, **Vesselin Kourtev**.

As a research associate in RNA Therapeutics, Galina, like John, loves science. In fact, in her native Bulgaria, before coming to the U.S. in 1999 for post-doctoral work, she was very involved in scientific education and outreach programs in eastern and western Europe through the United Nations Development Program.



Galina Kourteva, Ph.D. and John Olson, Ph.D.



But the arts have always been a vital part of her life, so when her husband - highly regarded for his art and teaching in Europe - followed her to the U.S. in 2002, they searched for a place where they could open their own fine art gallery.

By then, she already had spent many a lunch-time conversation at Roche talking with John, her boss, about their mutual quest to bridge the gap between science and arts.

She also had gone to several Olson/De Cari performances and knew that as president of the New York City Classical Guitar Society, John had revitalized what had been a declining organization, making it a thriving part of the city's classical guitar community through sold-out performances, educational seminars and other outreach.

"It is really amazing that he is so good as a scientist and manager of our group at Roche, and also such a great musician," said Galina.

So it was natural that when she and Vesselin opened their gallery in early 2008, John and his wife were among the first performers in the new space and have returned several times, including for the gallery's first anniversary reception, where they enthralled attendees with *Abyss*. The large audience included dozens of scientists, underscoring that the venue was perfect for those with interest in science and art.

"The evening was just phenomenal," recalled Galina.

Connecting Passions

Although their Roche research, which uses genomics-based technology to discover drug candidates in the areas of cancer, diabetes and respiratory illnesses, remains a priority for John and Galina, their lives wouldn't be complete without their art.

John, who has been playing guitar since high school in California (where he met his wife), always knew that he wanted to be a scientist. He was one of the top five students in his University of California, Berkeley, graduating class of 5,000, went on to receive his Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has published/presented a number of scientific papers.

But he never stopped playing the guitar, and after years of performances in a variety of solo and ensemble venues, last year he and his wife released their debut CD, *Quiet Songs*.

Their latest endeavor, the Science/Music Commissioning Project, is an effort to "bring together the parts of our lives that are normally separate," said John.

He is thrilled with the response from emerging and established composers, including noted composer Terry Champlin, faculty member at Mannes College of Music and Vassar College, who created *Abyss*.

"We're very excited because it allows us to uniquely contribute to the world of guitar and voice. It is really fun to see how much the idea has spread," he said.

Through the Alfa Art Gallery, Galina, too, is helping forge innovative, valuable relationships that she hopes will help protect earth.

"We believe that one salient image, sculpture or event can speak louder than volumes of scientific data and raise the public awareness about environmental problems, global warming and climate change," said Galina. "Bringing art and science together, we can change the way people do things in the world."

The gallery - which, in its short existence, has established itself as a cultural hub in downtown New Brunswick, N.J. - launched a Green Wave initiative with shows, open studios, presentations, performances and discussions that engage attendees in environmental, social and economic sustainability.

The impact has been so positive that New Brunswick officials asked Galina and her husband to become part of the city's Arts Council, and they are partnering on other environmental initiatives.

"It has been like a dream come true. My job and science are my first loves, and art is an important part of me. There are so many possibilities to move forward in both areas," she said.