

THE GUITAR, A CLASSIC
(A Short History of the Classical Guitar)

In 1969 Frederic V. Grunfeld wrote a book entitled The Art and Times of the Guitar. The introduction stated that "the musical world is now in the grips of a great resurgence of 'pure twang'". From Nashville and Liverpool, Bombay and Yokhama the jangling and thrumming of "plucked strings" have suddenly become dear to our ears.

Grunfeld points out that the baroque harpsichord was threatening to replace the piano; the Renaissance lute, in the hands of Julian Bream, was having a second 'golden age'; the banjo (probably the only truly American instrument) was indispensable for film scores that aspired to Americana.

The guitar is the leader in the "plucked string" family. It is estimated that there are over 20 million guitars in circulation in the United States alone. The Columbia Broadcasting System, in 1965, paid more money to acquire a guitar making firm than it did to gain control of the New York Yankees. The Book-of-the-Month Club has sold guitar records of a French gypsy, Manitas de Plata. In France the tradition minded luthiers have started producing guitars instead of violins and cellos. In Russia students are playing the guitar rather than their balalaikas. And on it goes. In every country of the world the guitar has found its place as a favored instrument.

Never has there been such a "return"---not even when after a battle between Spainards and Portuguese, the losing army took to the hills and left 11,000 guitars on the battlefield!

The guitar has had its periods in history of both acceptance and rejection, but has always remained a real force in both the social and musical lives of the people.

To have been associated with a guitar in the middle of the 16th Century

would have identified you as a Spanish Don Juan. At the beginning of the 17th Century in Italy being a guitar player would have classified you as "one of those Charlatans that strum the guitar and sing foolish songs". At the start of the 18th Century , playing was a royal occupation and quite suitable for kings and queens! In our own country the guitar has had a much similar history. The Cowboy, a herd of cattle, a guitar and a song is very much a part of the history of our West. The folk/country music made use of the guitar, the "blues" leaned on the guitar, and "rock", hard or otherwise, uses it as its basic instrument.

It was not until quite recently that carrying a guitar to music lessons was socially accepted; somehow, if you needed lessons you and your guitar were not properly suited to each other. The use of the guitar as basically a folk instrument contributed to this attitude. The guitar has been referred to as the instrument that everyone plays and very few play well; easy to play poorly, and a most difficult instrument to play well. Personal experience confirms this!

My purpose in this paper will be to give a brief history of this most popular instrument; and hopefully, by so doing, I will increase your appreciation for the guitar and its music. My problem will be how to be objective, for the guitar becomes a part of those that dare to spend some time with it.

Astronaut Scott Carpenter has been quoted as he was preparing to take off on the 1962 space journey as saying to his wife, "If this comes to a fatal, screaming end for me I will have three main regrets: I will have lost the chance to contribute to my children's preparation for life on this planet, I will miss loving you when you are a grandmother, and I will never have learned to play the guitar well".

Giuseppe Mazzini, as he went into exile, said, "I could live willingly all my life in a closed room if I only had with me my books and guitar".

The lover of the guitar doesn't expect everyone to share his interest, but he feels an obligation to educate as many as he can and hope to win an occasional convert.

The guitar received its name from the ancient cithara - but its earliest ancestor, the lute or pandoura, dates from about 1700 B.C. There were three basic stringed instruments in the ancient world: the harp, lyre, and the lute all developed from the musical bow. The addition of a turtle shell was probably the first sound box, and was the first use of the principle that lead to the development of the guitar. All instruments using vibrating strings are classed in a group called chordophones.

The early harp used strings of varying lengths to produce different pitches. The lyre used strings of same or similar lengths and varied the pitch by altering their tension. It was the introduction of the neck and the use of the fingers to change the string length and pitch that lead to the development of the lute. Early instruments with necks have been found dating 2000 B.C. in Mesopotamia, and in Egypt dating from about 1500 B.C. The Egyptians called their instrument a nefer, the Greeks and Romans called theirs a pandoura. Chordophones or stringed instruments, were spread throughout the ancient world, and each country named them differently.

The Romans spread the use of Chordophones into Europe, but the beginning of the guitar can be said to have been in the eighth century. This was when the Moors invaded Spain and brought with them a lute-like instrument, along with a love for music and all the related arts. Before the Moors had been expelled from Spain in 1492, this lute-like instrument had become a necessity in every household in Spain. We still refer to it as the "Spanish Guitar".

When did the guitar become a guitar, or when is a guitar? The lute, the many stringed instrument, was developing in central Europe. The lute, with its

double string courses, its wide neck, and its drone strings was the classic instrument. It was used to play the polyphonic music of the early Renaissance period. It didn't fit the style of the gypsy or folk music of the common man. The early four course guitar in the 13th and 14th Century Spain did just that. This early guitar existed along with another instrument called the Vihuela. The Vihuela usually had six courses of strings. (A course of strings denotes two or more strings that vibrate together, the strings being the same pitch or an octave apart). The Vihuela had a neck with a fingerboard. The frets or stops were made of gut and tied around the neck. There were usually ten to twelve of these frets. The real problem that the musician had was determining where they should be tied. The results left a lot to be desired.

Juan Bermudo, a Franciscan monk and musician, wrote in 1555 that, "The main reason why some vihuelas play badly is the frets -- one of the things which have not been worked out well is the placing of frets. This instrument is almost never fretted properly". The same could have been said of the lute with its multiple strings. A real problem was getting two gut strings to sound alike. A French wag put it in this way, "One can see the luteist tuning up, but one never hears him play". A German critic observed that, "If a luteist reaches the age of eighty you can be sure he has spent 60 years tuning and fixing broken strings".

One can readily understand why the simple four string guitar was welcomed. By the beginning of the 16th Century the guitar had taken over. This was not without a loud cry from the true music lovers. Some said it was no more than a cowbell and was so easy to play that there was no stable boy who was not a musician on the guitar.

Both the four string guitar and the vihuela had become obsolete around the early part of the 17th Century. The vihuela faded away, but the four string

guitar had become a guitar of five strings. Both instruments had found their way into Mexico and had been established in the New World. The shape of the guitar was developing and looking more and more as we know it today. The strings were still in courses, the finger board had extended over its belly, and the placement of frets had been mathematically determined. The art of making them had spread, and craftsmen of Germany, France and Italy were making fine guitars.

The classic music that had been played only on the lute and the vihuela was now being adapted to the guitar. It had moved from a folk instrument into a new status. Not only was the best of music played upon it but the best of people became associated with it. Louis XIV and Charles II of England were among the list that could be found "twanging on their guitars". Louis XIV had his own teacher attached to his court, a master on the instrument, one Francesco ~~Courbet~~ ^{Corbetta} ~~Courbet~~ was the foremost guitarist of the time. ~~Courbet~~ ^{Corbetta} later (in 1660) went to England and joined the court of Charles II. The King's love for the guitar brought it into favor in all England -- "Everyone played upon it, well or ill, and you were as sure to see a guitar on a lady's toilet as rouge or patches".

The guitar reached a peak in popularity in the 17th Century. It also became associated with the fairer sex, and a number of artists found that any painting of a lady must include her guitar. The leading artist of the period was Jean Antoine Watteau, and each of his ladies cradled a guitar in her arms, or one stood near by, just in the event a song came to mind. Later artists that used the guitar include, among others, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Courbet, and Pablo Picasso. Paintings by these artists hang in the great art institutes of the world. "The Old Guitarist" by Picasso is in the Art Institute of Chicago; while Manet's "The Music Lesson" is in Paris.

The beginning of the 18th Century started a turning away from the guitar. The harpsichord was becoming the instrument of the drawing room, the guitar was losing its popularity with the true musicians. Only in Spain was it used for playing the classical music of the times, it had returned to the place it originally occupied, that being the common man's musical instrument.

One bit of English history highlights some of the competition between the guitar and the harpsichord. A small guitar, known as the English guitar, had become quite popular with the English ladies. Its popularity had caused the ladies to dispose of the harpsichords at auction or exchange them for the guitar. One harpsichord maker by the name of Kirkman was just about to go broke. He came up with an inspired solution. He purchased a number of cheap guitars and gave them to the girls in the milliners' shops (ladies without the highest morals) and he also taught them a few chords. The real ladies soon became ashamed of their frivolous and vulgar taste and returned to the harpsichord.

The guitar had remained practically the same instrument for centuries. It was between the years 1770 and 1850 that the modern guitar emerged. It has changed little since. What were the changes? During this period there was a change from five to six courses, from double strings to single strings, tuning, construction and instruction methods were standardized. The French and the Italians were first to adopt the single string and to develop the standard tuning still in use today.

A German luthier, Georg Stauffer, was granted a license in 1822 to improve the construction techniques. Stauffer developed the modern fingerboard that extends over the table, almost to the sound hole. Stauffer had to be licensed. The making of guitars was not left to just anyone. This was a highly skilled trade, and the training was a long one, with a license granted only after

completing training and building a series of instruments that passed rigid inspections by a board of examiners.

Georg Staufer became directly related to guitars in America. He taught Christian Fredrich Martin his techniques. C.F. Martin emigrated to New York in 1830, and founded the C.F. Martin Company in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. This company is still in business making fine guitars.

During these years many experiments were made trying to determine the best shape for the guitar, but always there was a return to the shape we know today. The one single most important part of the guitar is its table or top. It is the table that picks up the vibration of the strings and produces the sound. The table must be strong enough to hold six drawn strings, but be so constructed so it, too, can vibrate. Over the years, many methods had been used, most of them built around transverse bracing. These braces extended across the underside of the top, in both the upper and lower bouts. The result was a strong but unresponsive table.

It was in 1850 that Antonio de Torres introduced a fan system of bracing that made all other systems obsolete. His system of bracing supported the lower, or larger bout, and left the upper bout, containing the sound hole, practically free. Torres made guitars until his death in 1892. His instruments became the classical guitar as we know it today.

He is referred to as the "Stradivarius of the guitar". All fine guitar makers of today follow his methods. After Torres death his methods were continued in Spain by what was known as the "Madrid School". This school included Jose Ramirez I and his brother, Manuel.

The Ramirez guitar is still considered the leading guitar and is made in the same shop headed by the grandson of Jose I, Jose Ramirez III. Spain continues to be the leader in making fine classical guitars, although there are also fine

ones made in Germany, France, England and the United States. One of the best known American makers is Manuel Rodriguez, trained in the shops of Jose Ramirez III in Madrid.

The last work in guitar sound might not be out. Unlike the violin, there is no agreement on just how to make the best tone and release the most volume. In recent years, an American scientist, Dr. Micheal Kasha (Director of the Institute of Molecular Biophysics of Florida State University) has applied his skills and knowledge trying to answer this question. The future only knows what science might do to the guitar.

The lives and work of two men have been the leading factors in the rediscovery of the guitar. Francisco Tarrega, born in 1854, spent most of his life dedicated to returning the guitar to popularity and re-establishing it as a classic instrument. He not only wrote good music for it, but set about transcribing over one hundred works of Beethoven, Chopin, Schuman, and Bach. He was called "the spiritual Phoenix of the guitar". During his lifetime he saw a new beginning for the guitar with other composers writing for it and good music being played on it. Among Tarrega's friends was a young man by the name of Andres Segovia. Tarrega's love and hopes were accepted by Segovia.

Segovia has pursued those goals, writing good music, transcribing great music, and playing it professionally all over the world.

Today Segovia is near 90, and he is still considered the world's greatest guitarist, and still he has those same goals.

How has he succeeded? Quite well! Today there are dozens of professional concert guitarists, playing the best of music to concert halls filled with people. There are over 50 colleges in the U.S. alone that teach the guitar as a major instrument, most of them offering master degree programs.

Every large city has a Classical Guitar Society where its members share

their talents and common love for the instrument. In 1946, after over a hundred years without one, publication of a professional magazine dedicated to the classical guitar was begun. This publication, The Guitar Review, continues to be a great success.

There may be some doubt about what the future holds, but we can be sure man will be holding his guitar, and loving it.

Note: the failure to include any reference to the Nashville Sound, the Memphis Sound, and the current country music scene has been deliberate. That is another story, all made possible because the guitar has survived and was available to fill the need.

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