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The Classical Guitar: A Brief History and Introduction to the 20th Century

Repertoire

Curtis N. Smith

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Presented in to the Harold B. Lee Library along with a donation of 20th Century Classical Guitar music scores—intended to enlarge and enrich current holdings.
Despite clouded conceptions that stem from its current popularity, the guitar has a history that reaches back as far or farther than most orchestral instruments. Its known history dates from the second century BC to the present day, although scholars intimate that its history reaches even further back than the dates found on some of the first Mesopotamian lyres (Bellow 3). Historians have dated stone carvings of the guitar’s ancestral chordophones to 1900 BC. Notice the frets and strings in the following sculptures and the strings and tuning pegs in the Egyptian wall painting.

Babylonian Clay Relief from Esshunna 1900 BC (Bellows 3)

Copy of Egyptian Wall Painting, Theban Tomb 1420 BC (Bellows 23)
5\textsuperscript{th} cent. Egyptian chordophone (Bellows 26)

One of the possible etymologies of the word “guitar” is that it comes from the Greek word \textit{Kithara}, meaning “a large plucked lyre.” (Bellow 55) has all the info on the names and their origins:

Apollo, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cent. AD holding 6 string “Cithara” (Grundfiel 13)
Ancestral “guitars”, 3rd Century – 15th Century AD (Bellow 28, 30, 50)

Left: Necked Instrument on Roman Sarcophagus 3rd Cent. AD,
Center Left: Page from Carolingian Psalter, 9th Cent. AD
Center Right: Guitar-like instrument Florence 10th Cent. AD
Right: Sculpture Cathedral of Toledo, Spain 14-15th Cent. AD

The Renaissance, with its abundance of artistic media, provides significant insight into the scope of the guitar’s—and its relatives’—popularity. The Renaissance four course, or four string, guitar found popularity in Spain, France, and Italy during the 16th century (Bellow 53). This instrument had four strings that were doubled, thus the “four course” guitar.

The vihuela, a relative of the guitar, also found favor in Spain during this period. Some of the oldest guitar and vihuela tablature extant dates to this period—predating modern musical notation by hundreds of years.

The Baroque Period can be generalized by the addition of a fifth string to the guitar, and like all things baroque, an intense attention to filigree and ornamentation in the guitar’s physical structure.
The Classical era (1750-1850) was a period of great popularity for the guitar. The addition of a sixth string was a great innovation and the music of famous composers and performers such as Fernando Sor and Mauro Giuliani helped to solidify the classical repertoire. Guitarists also began to adopt the more standardized notation system during this period.
Guitar made by Antonio Vinaccia 1790 (Bellow 143)

During this period the Lute, a relative of the guitar, reached its climax. The contrapuntal textures that define the baroque aesthetic were pushed to the extreme with the lute—creating technical and maintenance issues far more difficult than that of the guitar. Lutes from this period were known to have as many as 22 strings. One can imagine the difficulty of the lute versus the simple five strings of the guitar.

The guitar would eventually vanquish the lute with its sheer playability and accessibility. Playability is the reason for the guitar’s accessibility. It is this forte that has produced widespread popularity—while also producing just as many mediocre players. Most guitarists are self taught and never progress past strumming chords.

By the mid 19th century the guitar was securely defined as a six string instrument with six individual strings. This time period in Western music history is generally the Romantic era, but for the guitar, which tends to be an instrument of more conservative temperament, the Classical era aesthetic extended into the mid 19th century, about 20 years after the death of Beethoven. The guitar saw a dramatic decline in popularity during the last half of the 19th century, due to many factors—the main being the rise in popularity of the piano as a parlor entertainment.
The guitar would see a surge of activity during the early 20th century that would continue to the present. The guitar can be thought of as a late bloomer—its history predates many instruments but its popularity extends far beyond many of its contemporaries. The 20th and now 21st centuries are the height of the classical guitar.

**The 20th Century to Present – Andres Segovia’s Role**

The classical guitar emerged from the obscurity of the late 19th century with an exponential rise to its current worldwide status. This worldwide status is the combination of many factors but a single name is unavoidable—Andres Segovia.

From a very young age Segovia “dreamed of raising the guitar from the sad artistic level in which it lay” (Wade, Maestro 41). The burning drive to “raise the guitar” and turn it into a respectable instrument was Segovia’s life and eventually his immortal legacy. Segovia had a clear vision of the classical guitar’s ascent to prominence in the
20th century. His five “points” mentioned in Graham Wade’s “Celebration of Segovia” are as follows.

First, Segovia knew he had “to extract the guitar from the noisy and disreputable folkloric amusements” (Wade, Celebration 117). This “sad artistic level” was the base strumming of chords that is so often associated with the guitar even to this day. For centuries the guitar had been a strummed accompaniment to song and dance, never gaining access to the concert halls or serious circles of musicianship.

Second, Segovia wished to “request the living serious composers not in the field of the guitar to write for me. … to create a wonderful repertoire for my instrument” (Wade, Celebration 116). The guitar at this point in time, the earlier 20th century, had very little repertoire based on the standard western musical tradition. Whereas the violin, piano and other respected instruments had centuries of academically sanctioned music. The guitar was almost completely without a standard philharmonic-level repertoire. By the end of Segovia’s life the following eminent composers had written pieces for the guitar in dedication to the maestro:

Spanish composers Joaquin Turina, Manuel de Falla, Joaquin Rodrigo and Frederico Torroba. Mexican composer Manuel Ponce, Brazilian composer Hector Villalobos, Italian composer Castelnuovo-Tedesco, French composer Alexandre Tansman, English composer John Duarte, German composer Arnold Schoenburg and scores more from around the globe. (Wade, Celebration 116)

Third, Segovia wished to “make the guitar known by the philharmonic public all over the world” (Wade, Celebration 116). Segovia was the emissary of the classical
guitar—literally ushering it into high society with his worldwide performances of newly composed and arranged pieces, much coming from the aforementioned composers.

Fourth, Segovia knew he had to “to provide a unifying medium for those interested in the development of the guitar.” He accomplished this “through my support of the now well known international musicological journal, *The Guitar Review*, developed by Vladimir Bobri” (Wade, Celebration 117). Segovia understood what he could become and his sway he could eventually exercise over the music world. He also knew that to uniformly accomplish this he needed a scholarly journal to carry his message the world’s guitar aficionados.

Late in life Segovia said, “I am still working on my fifth and maybe the last purpose, which is to place the guitar in the most important conservatories of the world for teaching the young lovers of it, and thus securing its future” (Wade, Celebration 117). Segovia had to ensure the guitar’s continued ascent in popularity among the serious musical circles of the world. For this reason he became the iconic pedagogue of 20th century classical guitar—his chosen handful of students becoming the icons of the latter 20th century classical guitar. Where Segovia left off they began and their work is the broader foundation of the modern classical guitar.

Famous guitarists to come from his tutelage include: Eliot Fisk, Alirio Diaz, Oscar Ghiglia, Christopher Parkening, José Tomas, John Williams, and Michael Lorimer. Many more guitarists like Julian Bream and John Williams share close ties with Segovia through repertoire and professional contact.
20th Century Guitar Schools:

To attempt a listing of all of the guitarists and movements of the 20th century would be impossible in the scope of my research. In order to understand the 20th century I have simplified the categories into schools—they are broad regions that bear the name of the country with the prominent guitarist-fostering country of the region. The following is a summary of the schools and the influential pieces that I have chosen to represent each school:

- The Spanish School: Spain and Portugal
- The English School: British Isles
- The European School: mostly Italy, France, Germany
- The Russian School: Russia and former Soviet Union countries
- The North American School: United States and Canada
- The Central/South/Latin American School: South of Mexico and Carribean
- The Asian School: Namely China, Japan, and Neighbors

I will give a brief overview of each of these and their general role in the current trends of the classical guitar. However, I will focus solely on pieces and composers whose works are indispensable and especially on those whose works I am working to acquire for the Library.

The Spanish School:

As seen with the prowess of Segovia the early 20th century, Spain has been the cradle of the classical guitar. The most prominent composers of Spain include Federico Moreno Toroba, Manuel de Falla, Jaquin Turina, and Joquin Rodrigo. Arguably the most famous piece of music ever written for the classical guitar is the mighty *Concerto de*
Aranjuez, written by Juaquin Rodrigo in 1939. However, the young Spanish composer Antonio Jose composed and his Sonata for classical guitar have surfaced recently, showing a brilliant genius. Antonio Jose was possibly, as Ravel noted, “the greatest composer of Spain in the 20th century.” Sadly, Jose was executed by firing squad in 1936 by the Falangist movement. I have acquired Antonio Jose’s Sonata for Classical Guitar for the library—this is a rare, new, and exciting piece for the HBLL.

**The English School:** The English School has produced a myriad of virtuosic guitarist/composers. The most prominent guitarist-composers include John Duarte, John Williams, and Julian Bream. Other significant composers include Alan Rawsthorn, Benjamin Britten, Humphrey Searle, Sir Malcolm H. Arnold, Sir Rodney Bennett, Peter Maxwell Davies and many more. Following are the pieces purchased for the library:

- Steven Dodgson, *Fanasy-Divisions*
- Richard Bennett, *Impromptus*
- T. Wilson, *Soliloquy*

**The European School:** All currents of the western musical tradition flow from or through Italy, Germany, and France. Of particular importance are the changes that occurred during the late 19th century and early 20th century in France and Germany. The French avant guard and modern artistic expressions we consider commonplace today—namely impressionism, led to what we consider “modern” art. The Germanic tradition, championed by composers such as Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven, found new expressive complexity in the works of Schoenberg and his pupils. Other European cultures have
contributed but the core of the European Western Music tradition lies in Italy, France, and Germany. The following are pieces that continue this rich tradition:

**French:**

Poulenc, *Sarabande*

Kleynjans, F, *A L’aube Du Dernier Jour*

Roland Dyens, *Songe Capricorne, Libra Sonatine, Tango en Skai, Trois Suadade 1 – 3, Trois Peices Polyglottes, Valse en Skai*

D. Milhaud, *Segoviana*

**German:**

H. W. Henze, *Drei Tentos* (Edited by Julian Bream)

**Greek:**

Gilbert Biberian, *Greek Suite, Prelude and Fugue*

**Russian School:** The Soviet Union produced many powerful composers but the popularity and accessibility of the following guitarist/composers came more recently, after the dissolving of the Soviet Union. Stepan Rak and Nakita Koshkin both combine a modern aesthetic with the classical tradition. They draw heavily on folklore, the Western tradition, and rock in their approach. The following pieces were purchased for the library:

Stepan Rak, *Collected Works*

Nakita Koshkin, *Usher Waltz*

**North American School:**

America contributed to the music world mainly through its invention of Jazz. However, the “minimalist” movement would become another defining characteristic of the 1960’s and 70’s American art scene. Visual artist like Polluck and Stella were
creating bare-minimum art while composers like Feldman, Cage, and Reich were inventing a paralleled musical language. A famous classical guitar pieces from this period is *Electric Counterpoint* by Steve Reich, (which the HBLL already owns). Along with the minimalists there were those who extended the complex modern language of the time into an even more virtuosic art form. Pieces like Mario Davidovsky’s *Syncronism no.10* (also owned by the HBLL) showcase the virtuosic atonal approach. I purchased the following piece to display this American atonal virtuosic style:

Elliot Carter, *Changes*

Andrew York, *Introduction to Sunburst and Sunburst* *

**South American/Latin American School:** The Latin American guitar tradition can be seen as an extension of the powerful Spanish tradition. Composers of the 20th century are combining folk elements with the Spanish/European tradition, Afro-Cuban influences, and other influences for a rich synthesis. This synthesis provides a wide range of musical approaches; from the traditional tonal approach to that of complete atonality—all sharing a distinct Latin flavor. The HBLL has very good sampling of Latin American classical guitar music. The following were pieces that help compliment the current holdings:

Leo Brouwer, *Fuga no.1, Hika – in memoriam Toru Takemitsu*,

Carlo Domeniconi, *Toccata in Blue, Gli Spiriti, Hommage a Jimi Hendrix*,

*Koyunbaba Suite*

Antonio Lauro, *Vol.5 Seis Por Derecho, Pasaje Aragueno*

Piazzolla, Astor, *Histoire du Tango*

Merlin, *Suite del Recuerdo*
J.G. Crespo, *Nortena (papas)*

**Asian School:** The Asian school, namely China and Japan, has a music history that predates the Western Europeans by centuries. Manifestations of this rich history are evident in Chinese pipa and Japanese shamisen. The classical guitar, though not native or directly related to this existing string tradition, has been well received in Asia. The classical guitar received one of its greatest blessings from Japan when the classical guitar was incorporated as a certified instrument in the Suzuki method. The most recent virtuoso of the classical guitar is the unmatched Kazuhito Yamashita—known for his “orchestral” approach and his wildly virtuosic arrangements. An influential composer from Japan is Toru Takamitsu. His use of color and subtlety has made him the most prominent Japanese composer for the classical guitar. I purchased these pieces:

- Toru Takamitsu, *In the Woods, 12 songs, All in Twilight Folios*
- Kazuhito Yamashita, *Imaginary Forest*

**Overview:**

While reviewing the history of the classical guitar and tracing its ascent to and through the 20th century one realizes that the last century has truly been the debut of the classical guitar. While the history is rich, the repertoire does not begin to blossom exponentially until the turn of the century. Once in the 20th century, the activity is so constant that it is difficult to represent this growth in the scope of any one project. The pieces represented here are only a brief sampling of the wealth that exists. While this proves to be a difficulty in selecting scores for the library it is also a testament to the realization of Andres Segovia’s vision for the classical guitar.
Another factor that must be taken into consideration is that of permanency. What pieces written now will become the pieces played in 10-20 years? The cutting edge can cut in many directions. For this purpose most of the pieces acquired have been proven by recitalists for the last 10-20 years at least. There are some pieces that will be “risks” but I have designated a smaller portion of the grant funds toward these pursuits. This leaves the ever-present task of compiling new scores for the classical guitar to a future aficionado. Hopefully these additions will benefit and inspire classical guitarists to not only study the established pieces, but to branch out into new and fertile musical compositions that will one day be considered timeless.
Works Cited and Consulted


"Interview with Andres Segovia." *Celebration Interview*. Credit Michael Jest. BBC. 1978.


