

The Evolution of The Classical Guitar

The concert stage is empty except for an ordinary piano stool and a footstool just under five inches high. About three minutes after the scheduled starting time, a plump, mild-looking septuagenarian dressed in white tie and tails ambles on, carrying a beautiful wooden guitar.

He settles himself comfortably on the piano stool, places his left foot on the smaller stool and looks out at the audience with an expression of benign indulgence. The murmur of conversations subsides, and when total silence has lasted perhaps twenty seconds, his well-muscled fingers begin to move across the strings. From that moment on, listeners experience a unique and unforgettable enchantment. For this is Andres Segovia, the greatest classical guitarist in the world.

- Noel Busch, *Reader's Digest*, October 1972

This image is one of the more significant moments in the history of the classical guitar. The path the instrument has traveled from the early renaissance to its present day status was by no means a trail marked by public recognition and respect. Andres Segovia is by far the most well known classical guitarist in the world, and he is often credited with bringing the classical guitar into the forefront as a respected musical instrument worthy of composition and solo performance.

While he certainly helped push the guitar into the spotlight and advanced its repertoire significantly, Andres Segovia certainly cannot take all of the credit for the respect the guitar commands in today's musical world. He benefited from a long line of incredible performers and their compositions. The lineage of the classical guitar is a fascinating story of gifted musicians that continues to this day, and will in all likelihood continue for years to come. (p. 3 Tosone)

The history of the classical guitar and its players follows and was influenced by the history of art and music in general. Therefore, it is feasible to define and emphasize the different eras of the classical guitar. With new eras come new styles, new players and technological advancements in the way the guitar was built. All of these were major factors in the evolution of the instrument. The eras are as follows: Late Middle Ages (1200-1450); Renaissance (1450-1600); The Late Renaissance/Baroque Era (1600-1750); The Classical Era (1770-1830); Romantic/Post Romantic Era (1830-1910); The Twentieth Century era (1910-present) (p. 4 Tosone)

As with most topics in history the eras closer to the present offer far more information and evidence than more antiquated times. That explains the lack on information on the guitar in the middle ages. Most of the information on the guitar from this time period is in the form of images and texts. There are no remaining guitars from this time period. However, from the images and texts left in existence it is known that a guitar, or some variation on it existed. Minstrels played two different types of guitars; the *guitarra morisca* or the *guitarra latina*. *See fig. 1* (p. 4 Tosone)

There is a definite distinction between the two guitars. The Moors are likely responsible for the *guitarra morisca*, and the origin of its name. Its sound box was oval and had several holes on its soundboard. It is possible that the Arabs could have influenced the design of this instrument through the influence of instrument makers in Western Europe. However, since there is no clear evidence for this speculation it is also a possibility that they were purely European in design, with no foreign influence. (internet, Faucher)

The Guitarra Latina had curved sides and is believed to have originated not in Spain but from some other European country. Because of its visible similarities to the modern guitar it is almost certain that this model of the guitarra is the model that developed into the modern guitar played today. (internet, Faucher)

Both guitars likely originated from the Tanburs of antiquated Rome, Greece and Persia, which are described as “long-necked lutes with pear-shaped bodies” (p. 4 Tosone)

The vihuela and the four-string guitar (also called the four course guitar) were the most important guitars of the renaissance period. *See fig. 2* The vihuela is described as “a guitar-like instrument, slightly larger with six pairs of strings, that was popular in Spain” (p. 4 Tosone) Originally, the vihuela was associated to a small four and five-string guitarra. At the same time, the sixteenth century saw the lute emerge as the favorite instrument of the aristocracy in nearly all of Europe. Spain, however, was a notable exception. In Spain, the lute had become associated with the Moors and their oppressive rule. Therefore the Spaniards did not appreciate the instrument. They did, however, appreciate the music that was written for it, and therefore searched for a means by which the music could be performed on an instrument other than the lute.

The aristocrats turned to the popular guitarra, which had four double strings. However, the four stringed guitarra did not have necessary resources to meet the requirements of complex, polyphonic music. In addition, the nobles of Spain were disdainful of the guitar as it was then an instrument of the common people. To solve these problems, the four-string guitar was enlarged and given six double strings, turned in the same manner as the present six-string guitar with the exception of the third string,

turned a half tone lower. This instrument came to be known as the vihuela. (p. 12 Summerfield)

There is little music available from this time period, and hardly any of it is still played to this day. However, there is knowledge of composers and music is available. The prominent composers of the renaissance include Adrian Le Roy, Luys Milan, Luys de Narvaez and Alonso Mudarra. Very little of their music is suited for the modern guitar because it was all composed for the lute or the vihuela, which were far more popular than the guitarra and more respected. (p. 5 Tosone)

Though the modern guitar co-existed with the vihuela it was often overshadowed by it. It was not until the turn of the eighteenth century that modern guitar gained prominence. From then on the progression of the guitar was simply a “course progression”. In the classical era the five-course guitar evolved into the six-course guitar, and now in the twentieth century guitars have as many as ten strings. These years also saw the “standardization of string length, making the fingerboard wider and making the body larger”. (p.4 Tosone) This had the effect of making the guitar a far more versatile instrument capable of performing much more complex music.

These evolutions in the guitar are undoubtedly what caused composers to consider it as a serious musical instrument. One of the first composers to write music for the modern guitar¹ was Francesco Corbetta.² Like most early guitar players Corbetta began playing the guitar against his parents will. They encouraged him to put his musical talents towards a different and more respected instrument. The persuasion of his parents was to no use as Corbetta quickly improved and after touring Italy traveled to Spain where King

¹ Francesco Corbetta composed for the five-course guitar. While the five-course guitar of the baroque era is similar to modern guitars it is not identical, however the music is easily translated

² Also known as Francesco Corbera and Francis Corbet

Philip IV took him in as court musician. As court musician he wrote his first piece of music entitled *Guitarra Espanol y Sus Defferencias de Sonos*.

Corbetta next found himself as the court musician for the now infamous Louis XIV of France. These appointments lead to his working for Charles II of England. Charles II was famous for his immature nature as a ruler. One historian called him “the disgrace of the country and the ridicule of foreigners – the King and his courtiers were entirely given up to gambling and love making.” (p. 81 Bone) It was in this atmosphere that Corbetta flourished and did a great deal in garnering respect for the guitar while Charles II did a great deal in garnering disrespect for England. Sir Walter Scott best describes Corbetta’s influence in his *Memoirs of the Court of Grammont*:

There was a certain foreigner at court, famous for the guitar, he had a genius for music, and he was the only man who could make anything of the guitar. This Francesco had composed a saraband which either charmed or infatuated every person; for the whole guitarery at court were trying at it, and God knows what a universal strumming there was. The Duke declared it was played to perfection. (p. 81-82 Bone)

Francesco Corbetta was instrumental in instilling in the aristocracy the belief that the guitar was capable of performing respectable music. Corbetta’s greatest accomplishment, however, was convincing the aristocracy and social elite that the guitar was worthy of commissioning compositions for. Corbetta remained a popular performer in England until the revolution of 1688 when he was forced to flee the country. He passed away a few years later in France.

Another seventeenth century musician that helped establish the classical guitar was Gaspar Sanz. While Sanz composed several songs and dances his contribution to the lineage of the classical guitar was in writing the first ever definitive instructional book on

the instrument. Sanz's book, Entitled *Instruccion de musica sobre la Guitarra Espanola*, was first published in 1674 in Saragossa³ and has since been reissued by a London antiquary in 1949. (p. 309 Bone)

The majority of the other remaining pieces from the Late Renaissance/Baroque era were not composed for the guitar but for other similar instruments such as the lute, keyboard, solo violin and solo cello. Composers included Bach, Scarlatti and Leopold Weiss.

According to several historians, the evolution of the guitar into a six-stringed instrument in the Classical Era (1770-1830) should have "lay(ed) the foundation for the golden age of guitar music." (p. 5 Tosone) The sixth string was the lowest E and had not been introduced until the Classical Era. (p. 309 Bone) Its introduction increased the versatility of the guitar exponentially. However the guitar experience no golden era in the Classical or Romantic period.

The great composers of these eras, who are all internationally famous even today, never composed for the guitar. Composers such as Beethoven and Mozart never wrote a single note for the guitar. The expansion of the concert hall and the fact that orchestra's continued to grow in size and decibel production did not help the guitar gain acceptance as an orchestral instrument. (p. 6 Tosone)

While the addition of the sixth string did not immediately make the guitar well known it did serve the purpose of attracting several talented musicians to the instrument, which did lead to the instruments. These gateway musicians set the stage for Andres Segovia to bring the guitar into the mainstream. These musicians composed countless pieces that served to bolster the guitar's repertoire significantly.

³ The city of Saragossa is currently known as Zaragoza.

The most celebrated composer/guitarist of the Classical and Romantic eras was Fernando Sor, who came to be known as “the Beethoven of the Guitar.” (p. 335 Bone) Sor began his career as a composer with the assistance of his first patron, The Duchess of Alba. The Duchess was rather different from other aristocrats who supported the arts. Instead of pressuring him to write exclusively for her, she gave Sor a study in her house and let him work on his own pieces at his own speed (Jeffery Composer and Guitarist 18).

Besides being an excellent composer Sor was also a performer of the highest caliber and technical ability. His talent was so sought after that it took him throughout Europe and Asia to perform for some of the highest nobility of the day. He traveled to Russia and other neighboring countries playing in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, and Warsaw, in Moscow, he premiered his ballet "Cendrillon", it turned out to be a success with both the public and the critics (Jeffery Composer and Guitarist 79). The following review of one of Sor's symphonies gives a vivid picture of his music:

The creative worth of Sor's guitar sonatas is high. The ideas, which grow out of the instrument yet stand up well enough apart from it, are fresh and distinctive. the harmony is skillful and surprisingly varied, with bold key changes and with rich modulations in the development sections. The texture is naturally of interest too, with the melody shifted from top to bottom, to middle, and frequent contrapuntal (two separate melody lines combined) bits added. Among the extended forms, the first allegro movements still show considerable flexibility in the application of 'sonata form', especially in the larger number of ideas introduced and recalled. For that matter, the style still goes back to that of Haydn and Boccherini, especially in the first movement of Op. 22, which has all the neatness of syntax and accompaniment to be found in a classic symphony, and its third and fourth movements, which could nicely pass as a Minuet and Rondo by Haydn." (Turnbull 89)

After Sor's death in 1839 there was about a twenty-year period where the guitar was for the most part forgotten as a concert instrument despite the headway it had made. It was not until Francisco Tarrega began composing as a young boy that the guitar witnessed its revival. His compositions included "studies, preludes, scherzos, minuets and concert fantasias" The famous composer Albanez said after hearing his compositions interpreted by Tarrega that "they (were) superior to (his) own piano versions." Compositions like these drew the attentions of classical composers such as Falla, Manen and Ponce, who would eventually compose guitar pieces for Andres Segovia. (pgs. 354-356 Bone) A contemporary to Tarrega who also helped the guitar regain prominence was Angel Barrios. He is credited with popularizing ensemble music for the guitar and writing several zarzuelas, or comic operas and symphonic poems many of which are in the repertoire of Andres Segovia.

The works of artists like Sor, Tarrega, Barrios and countless others set the stage for Andres Segovia to finally bring the classical guitar into favor with the musical public and critics alike. Segovia's influence on the guitar is immeasurable. Jim Ferguson of *Guitar Player Magazine* writes:

Since the early 1900's his influence touched every facet of the instrument and its music. More than any other individual he was responsible for taking the guitar out of the parlors of Europe and onto the concert stages of the world. And while this on achievement is more than most players hope to accomplish in a lifetime, Segovia's other contributions made him a veritable legend in his own time. (p. 236 Menn)

The most important of the "other contributions" that Ferguson is referring to is the impact Segovia had on the repertoire of the guitar. Segovia's talent and sheer technical skill aroused interest from some of the world's greatest composers. As a result world-renowned composers began to write for the guitar and a serious solo instrument.

Segovia's collaboration with composers like Manuel Ponce, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Alexander Tansman, Federico Moreno Torroba, Joaquin Turina, Joaquin Rodrigo and Heitor Villa-Lobos improved the repertoire for the guitar exponentially. On top of this, Segovia was also an incredible teacher. His teaching has fostered some of the greatest guitar players of present day. His disciples include Christopher Parkening, Julian Bream, John Williams, George Sakellariou, Alexander Lagoya and Elliot Fisk. (p. 7 Tosone)

The most well known classical guitarist currently performing is Julian Bream, a Segovia student. The London Daily Telegraph has that Bream has "established himself as a player and interpreter of the first rank and his guitar as an elegant and expressive instrument." (p. 59 Bone) He and many other contemporary classical guitarists hope to build upon the rich history of the guitar and its artists and to continue to establish it among the ranks of serious concert quality instruments.