

Classical Guitar - Origins

The Origins of the Spanish Classical Guitar

by Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Cale

Liona Boyd has offered me the opportunity to write down some personal observations about my enduring and sustaining passion, the Spanish Classical Guitar. I am a Lieutenant Colonel of United States Marines, stationed in an area along the Tigris River, called the Digila, about 20 miles above Baghdad. I have spent the last five years here in Iraq. While I saw action during the Battle of Fallujah, I have devoted most of my time to living side by side with the Iraqi Army and assisting in the great mission of providing this deserving people with the ability to protect themselves and their country.

That most ancient of plucked instruments, the oud, migrated from this rich Middle-Eastern culture, to the country that the Arabs called Al- Andalus, the land of the Vandals, known to us now as Andalusia, the southernmost province of Spain. There it became the inspiration for a vision, or dream, if you will. Here the oud makers of Baghdad continue to build in spite of the fact that their lives are in danger here from the radical and violent fanatics intent on exploiting the people of Mesopotamia. These builders are the courageous safe-keepers of another even older dream. Perhaps they risk their lives because these very dreams of timeless allure and passion are greater than nations; so put the bare facts aside and dream with me awhile.

The Spanish Classical Guitar arose from a collective dream, the answer to a fervent prayer that sprang from the soul of Iberian People. If these desires, passions and fantasies had not been there all the time, yet different from anything that had come before, then the Spaniards might possibly still be satisfied to embrace and caress the kithara that the ancients brought them, or even the later and very perfect oud, the musical wellspring of the Andalusian Arabs. But the elusive Iberians rejected the Moors and their overtures and searched down through the centuries, undertaking a heartfelt, lonely hunt for the muse that would call out for the embrace of Spain and be a willing accomplice in a seduction of song.

Like a series of lost loves, the many experimental guitars that came and went during the quest for the classical guitar's ultimate marriage of form and function now provide us with intriguing ideas and food for thought. It is fascinating to contemplate each guitar ancestor; to trace the evolution of the true vine, as it were; to understand why the various elements were preserved, or ultimately set aside, in search of the perfection we now enjoy in the classical guitar.

The Arabian oud is one of the family of stringed instruments that reached its final form millennia ago. Its design is perfectly matched to the music it plays, and the music it plays is perfectly matched to the culture from which it sprang. The Samisen accomplishes the same for the delightful folk songs of the Ryukyuan islanders, as does the Sitar for the tribes of the Ganges and the Indus. The oud has been, since time immemorial, the vehicle for the maqams of the Arab chanters, providing endlessly intricate modal and polyrhythmic underlays for the richly textured love poems of the Bedouin. The lute calls out for the arms of the Saracens whose hands cannot resist caressing the oud's pear shaped body, to chafe its double strings with the eagle's quill and to delight in its dulcet vibrancy. But the maqams, celebrated and played to this day by the Arab lutenists, are still firmly rooted in the modes of the ancient world.

As redolent as are the oranges in the courtyards of the mosques along the Guadalquivir, the maqams and the oud could not quell the longing for something else deep within the soul of the Spaniards. Something new had been heard in the land in the form of the vocal hymns of the advancing Christian faith. All during the so-called Dark Ages, a slow progression from the late Roman Gregorian chant had been taking place in the music of the Early Church. This progression, perhaps brought on by the echoing acoustics of Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals made full use of all the overtones of the scale instead of the limited tonal series of the modes of Pythagoras. The use of all these overtones in vocal harmonies caused the modal systems to be gradually replaced by the richer harmonic textures of scales and keys. It followed naturally that this new music system began to generate new instruments with advanced technical features capable of supporting these radical, and sensuously beautiful ideas.

Ironically, the musicians of Northern Europe tried to modify the oud of Andalusia so that it could be capable of supporting this new music of many tones. The oud was fitted with frets to increase tonal precision, and given a sixth course of strings and a wider neck. Known in Northern Europe as the Lute or Luth, the complex demands of evolving musical forms mandated ever more extreme mutations to the svelte and compact form. The ultimate form of the Lute, the Theorbo, is over two meters of stork like neck, barrel shaped body and serried ranks of strings. Even the eagle quill was dispensed with in order to allow all five fingers to play. In Andalusia itself, however, perhaps due to the proximity of a culture that was in the last stages of decay, the dream of the people could only be fulfilled by a completely new instrument, a harbinger of what would ultimately become the classical guitar we love today.

Enter the vihuela, very different from the oud yet still a stringed instrument with a sound box and a neck. While the oud was pear shaped, the vihuela was among the first instruments to adopt a feminine shape with a double curve body suggesting shoulders, waist and hips. Much has been made of the classical guitar's shape reflecting the curves

of the female body, voluptuous hips, a comely waist and flaring bust, a slender graceful neck and delicately sculpted head. The vihuela is the first ungainly attempt to realize this elusive vision of sensuous yet clean limbed beauty. The vihuela was a rather overbearing and stout instrument, its dimensions robust in order to support a robust new music. The sound box was slab sided and thick waisted, the neck bulky and corded, and the head a spiky tangle of tuning pegs. True, the vihuela accomplished what the graceful and demure oud could never do, to render polyphonic music loud and clear, but in the process, the allure and sensuous charm of the oud were forever cast away.

Perhaps just the cumbersome nature and ungainly physical appearance of the vihuela would have prevented its further development. The additional challenges from the developing family of long necked lutes and the proliferation of keyboard instruments, now tuned to play well in all keys, certainly hastened the demise of the vihuela. It disappeared from view almost as quickly as one could say "harpsichord"! Of course in the modern era, exact and beautifully crafted examples of these early instruments can be commissioned from several devoted and skilled makers. In the meantime the disappearance of the vihuela at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the passing of the torch of the development of "serious" music to the keyboard instruments, probably served the development of the Spanish classical guitar very well.

The first mention of the classical guitar as a distinct instrument occurs in Portuguese literature in the late 1500's, and the earliest known classical guitar was built by a Lisbon maker. A sumptuous painting of the same general period by Jan Vermeer depicts a beautiful young girl obviously enjoying an equally beautiful little guitar. Several issues become immediately obvious. First the girl is enjoying herself! From her smile it is easy to see that the classical guitar could be a vehicle of pleasure and entertainment, not just a big sound engine for religious worship or the display of professional virtuosity. Next, that the instrument itself is quite dainty even in comparison to the rather petite instrumentalist. There is a distinct possibility that the diminutive aspect of the early Baroque guitar might have increased its appeal for those who wanted to have fun with music. Also, most importantly, the girl appears to be playing with a plectrum, or at least using thumb and finger as a plectrum. She is strumming chords on her classical guitar instead of plucking multiple voices with the fingers. We know that during this period, two distinct styles of playing emerged for the guitar. Music of a more formal nature was now being composed for the guitar by such composers as Gaspar Sanz, a Spanish priest and great influence on Joaquin Rodrigo, Robert de Visee and Francesco Corbetta, Portuguese and Italian virtuosos in the court of Louis XIV. This style utilized many moving parts and necessitated the use of the fingers.

But there was a simultaneous use of the instrument by amateurs as the accompaniment for popular song. This of course was accomplished by means of strumming all the strings, with a plectrum or with the thumb or grouped fingers. The left hand simply held a chord for the proper duration and the right fingers strummed the strings. The contribution of this simple method to the spread of popularity for the classical guitar cannot be emphasized enough. Instead of requiring the rigorous hours of worship necessary to develop concert technique, anyone with a hankering to play and just a little discipline could sing for his supper, woo a lover, or simply while away the hours embracing, caressing and making music with this inexpensive and portable little companion! Since then classical guitars of every price range have been enjoyed by the poor and the powerful simply as strummers. The classical guitar developed during this period the ability to join together the great variety of its admirers by the multiple facets of its elegant but also earthly and rustic persona.

The great violin maker of Cremona, Antonio Stradivarius, created his masterpieces during this period. Unfortunately for the world of the classical guitar, the master applied his skills to only a few precious examples. It is quite obvious at first glance that Antonio was personally enamored with the instrument. The forms of his classical guitars, while staying basically within the parameter of the time, are just that much tighter in the waist, just that much more fetching in the curves of upper and lower bout and even a little suggestive of the further charms of the feminine form in the subtle placement of ornamental inlay upon the soundboard! At the time most classical guitars tended to be rather gaudy in their ornament, purfling, marquetry and inlay. Here again Stradivarius exercised his exquisite taste by allowing the natural beauty of the timbers he chose to add to the visual impact of his classical guitars. Complex grain patterns and the contrasting colors of the wood provide extravagant and sensuous counterpoint to the beautifully taut and clean limbed profiles of these timeless instruments.

The aim of this tribute to the Classical Guitar is not to repeat for the umpteenth time the raw evolutionary data of the guitar. There are quite a few good and a few outstanding sources for rigorously compiled facts and figures, and I stand in mute admiration of all of them. The point should be made again that, from my observation post on the troubled banks of the Rivers of Babylon, the thing that is most important is the continuous trio sung by the guitar and her eternal suitors, the Troubadour and the Virtuoso. The view from here argues quite persuasively that what the world needs more than anything these days is indeed love. That the classical guitar has given centuries of support to such a tender cause is one more reason to thank the Muses for its existence!

Those legions of serenading amorosos in pursuit of this "tender cause love were abetted in their labors as the slightly recalcitrant Renaissance instruments were supplanted with the delicate but promiscuous Baroque Guitar; even so, the technical innovations of the

late 18th and early 19th centuries actually made making music with the guitar more convenient and more transparent to its paramour the musician! After all, even the humorous rule that derides complication is named KISS! Advancing technology made it possible to dispense with doubled strings, at the same time providing reliable geared tuning machines with which to keep them consistently tuned. This simplification of the stringing actually allowed for the addition of a single sixth bass string, increasing the range of the guitar and further simplifying chording and plucking.

Improved industrial techniques and a new perspective on labor made possible increased and less expensive production of guitars using the design of the still developing classical style, broadening again the accessibility of the little wooden barque with its cargo of song. It should also be mentioned that throughout the Baroque and Romantic eras the guitar had become quite the international traveler. This trend was probably started by the soldiers of the Spanish Empire, marching forth during the reign of Charles the Fifth to conquer the Low Countries, and the conquistadors to the New World. During the Romantic era, the artisan halls of Mirecourt in France provided thousands of well made, easy to play guitars travelling all across the sea lanes to every port of call for European ships. In this way the collective dream of the Mudejars became a fascination to all of Christendom and beyond.

In the past there was perhaps too much unfounded dismissal of the Baroque and Romantic guitars, perhaps to place all the more emphasis on the "advancements" of the next phase of classical guitar development. The increasing availability of reproductions of ancient guitars, the marvelous degree of skill of those makers who concentrate on these guitars, plus the current level of skill of the restorers who breathe new life into the surviving guitars, have all contributed to a much better understanding of the capabilities of these captivating and soulful instruments. These little masterpieces are capable of much more sound and projection than their diminutive stature would suggest. Properly strung and adjusted, the neck position and action support every demand of the virtuoso, and equally important, every enthusiasm of the ardent serenader! The simplified string system, the mechanical tuners, and the increased production techniques made sure that anybody who wanted a guitar, and there were uncounted multitudes across the world, could have one that left little to be desired and much to be coveted for the lover of life and music.

And yet, the old dream persisted, and in an old Moorish town on the banks of the river that bore that dream, nestled in the gardens of Spain, a quixotic searcher with restless heart and hands, a benign Pygmalion, labored through many a midnight, intent on making a paragon of beauty from rosewood, ebony and cypress, his own beloved Galatea. Antonio Torres, a country boy from a little village in the province of Almeria, had learned the craft of lutherie from solid Spanish journeymen. By the late part of the first half of the

nineteenth century he would certainly have been acquainted with a great amount of what we know as the bedrock of modern technology. He rode trains, had his photograph taken, wore a coat and tie and communicated by telegraph. In all probability he never carried a lantern to the outhouse in the middle of the night. Modern enough in all aspects, but drawn like a moth to the ancient flame that burns in the temple of the Muse, vulnerable as Ulysses to the Sirens above the rocks, like every last one of us poor delirious acolytes he only needed to see and hear the act of playing the classical guitar once to be forever among the chosen.

The big difference between Antonio Torres of Almeria and the overwhelming majority of the guitar carpenters was not only a highly developed mental picture of His Guitar, but a great deal of fine motor skill, obsessive persistence, eternal curiosity, perfectionism, and the essential but singular characteristic of being able to sense the absolute limit of effectiveness of a piece of timber using only the faculties of perception granted to him by his Creator. Stradivarius spoke of this divine affliction. Manuel Velazquez speaks of it as well, in a truly noble and disarming way that sounds more like an apology than a boast. It is probably best not to take too literally anyone who utters these words, including the three great artisans mentioned here. Simply let their eloquent classical guitars speak for themselves. There certainly are other great architects of the classical guitar, not to set off any incendiary protests. Of course there are others... Santos, Simplicio, Fleta, Hauser, all hail! The point is that the truly great makers simply possess the innate ability to not only judge timber, but to prepare each plate and piece, and to assemble them all, to a singular degree of perfection.

The roots of Andalusian culture in all its aspects have been nurtured by the waters of two great rivers, the Tigris and the Guadalquivir. To stand on the banks of either, to this day, is to stand in the crucible of the culture of that most mercurial and misunderstood of peoples, Los Gitanos, the Gypsies. The temptation is overwhelming to rhapsodize at great length on the pain and glory of their art, flamenco. Speaking of gypsy flamenco in such proximity to praises of Torres underscores the great gift, born of his enthusiasm and sympathy, that this master bestowed upon these impoverished and debilitated barefoot caliphs of the guitar.

In all probability, the wealthy hidalgos of Seville unwittingly funded the progress and development of the art of flamenco guitar. Using wood scraps left over from the construction of his fancy models, his finos, Don Antonio was able to cobble together far less expensive, but every bit as expressive, instruments that he bartered out of the back door of his shop into the calloused hands of sheep shearers and blacksmiths of the gypsy barrios. To this day, in a sort of perverse ritual, flamenco guitars are made by the current great masters from the same modest materials. Humble in facture, but priceless in craft, these gifts of the master in the hands of the gitano "tocaors" were the engines of

inspiration for an incredible body of technique. Anyone who has experienced the guitar being played in this manner, whether it be by one of the Titans who tour the world's concert stages or teenagers jamming in the streets of Sanlucar de Barrameda, will offer enthusiastic testimony to the fact that the touch of the Andalusian Gypsies is at once the most passionate, complex and glorious yet primitive and visceral embrace of the guitar to be encountered in this world! Anda!!!

There are classical guitar makers who came after Torres whose guitars, even though they are constructed upon his mature pattern or "plantilla", are not as resonant or penetrating as the best of the Lacotes or Panormos of the previous era. Likewise, there are Torres classical guitars made early in his first epoch that tend more towards the proportions and dimensions of the earlier era, but are still unmistakably Torres in their voice. The man's true genius lies elsewhere. It was Antonio Torres' intimate knowledge of his materials that awakened such fire in the sleeping timber. The thoroughbred temperament that he devined within the wood; his particular sensitivity for form, color and tactile sensation; The voluptuous curves of his classical guitar's torso; the febrile nuance of the string tension to the fingertips; together these sensations cause the act of plucking to become almost erotic in nature. These alchemistic powers place the figure of Torres high above the dome that arches over the temple of the Dream of the Guitar, nestled still in the gardens of Andalusia. This is why Torres is The Man who fulfilled The Dream. To be sure, only an individual maker, building individual guitars will ever be able to exercise such passionate intimacy with each component. On the other hand, the sensual, alluring form of the Torres guitar, and to a great extent the beauty of the materials and ornamentation, even the nuance of string tension and playability, can be readily available from both master craftsman and production line instruments so that the fundamental pleasures of embracing a lovely classical guitar and wooing her into song is accessible to all who fall under her spell. It is greatly to be hoped that my fellow enthusiasts are as delighted as I am that Don Antonio bestowed upon his most renowned guitar the name La Leona. Yet again we sense the subtle influence of the Muses!

This trade in the two types of guitars is carried on by most modern Spanish masters, be they from Granada or Madrid. Few, however, have displayed the consistency and devotion of the dynasty founded by Jose Ramirez the First in Madrid in 1885. For five generations the gluepots and bending irons of Jeronimo Street have served this family well in the combination of commerce and research, passion and common sense, factory and school that is the Ramirez atelier. To this day, Amalia Ramirez continues to operate a world wide business based on the production of a guitar that represents an ideal combination of seemingly irreconcilable opposites: the series production of unique masterpieces. Flamenco or concert Ramirez classical guitars represent the standard of excellence by which all other makers are judged. For many the possession of a Ramirez classical guitar has been the rite of passage into the company of Guitar Maestros ever

since Manuel Ramirez placed one of his guitars in the hands of a curious young man from the Andalusian mining village of Linares. The young man called himself Andres Segovia. From the time of Manuel's gift, the names of Ramirez and Segovia have remained inextricably linked.

The form of the classical guitar has come to be understood in terms of its master creator, Torres. In the same fashion the art of the classical guitar has come to be understood in terms of Segovia. The herculean efforts of many others on behalf of the guitar's form and repertoire indeed serve to lift even higher the labors of love of these two masters of the instrument. While Torres labored over the physical plan of the classical guitar, Segovia developed a cultural plan for the life of the instrument into which he joyfully poured every fiber of his being for 88 of his 94 years. His overriding ambition was to elevate the instrument to an exalted position amongst the performers of the world's concert stages. In order to make his part of the Great Dream come true he came to labor in many vineyards. First and largely by his own tutelage, he became a lyrical master of performance upon the guitar. He was willing to embark upon a lifetime of journeys to display his prowess in order that the guitar be heard and appreciated by an ever larger audience. He capitalized on his broadening fame and acceptance by persuading prominent composers to create a large body of new works for guitar.

As if this were not enough, Segovia himself undertook the painstaking task of researching ancient works for other instruments, such as the lute, in order to cultural plan for the life of the instrument into which he joyfully poured every fiber of his being for 88 of his 94 years. His overriding ambition was to elevate the classical guitar to an exalted position amongst the performers of the world's concert stages. In order to make his part of the Great Dream come true he came to labor in many vineyards. First and largely by his own tutelage, he became a lyrical master of performance upon the guitar. He was willing to embark upon a lifetime of journeys to display his prowess in order that the classical guitar be heard and appreciated by an ever larger audience. He capitalized on his broadening fame and acceptance by persuading prominent composers to create a large body of new works for classical guitar. As if this were not enough, Segovia himself undertook the painstaking task of researching ancient works for other instruments, such as the lute, in order to find additional attractive material suitable for concertizing. Finally, he gave unstintingly of his time and knowledge to those young students of the classical guitar who had proven themselves especially worthy of receiving the torch that illuminates this dream and carrying its light to the generations of the future. Andres Segovia, through a life dedicated to the joy of playing the guitar and enhancing its reputation, became the living embodiment of Goethe's great proverb "Talent is acquired in Solitude; Character is formed in the stream of Life."

The happy result of the labors, not only of Segovia but of the host of performing artists, composers and aficionados dedicated to the classical guitar, its repertoire, versatility and accessibility has expanded to a degree far greater than that of any other solo concert instrument. It's hard to imagine hitchhiking with a grand piano, but with the classical guitar, one may play Bach in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler or Beethoven in the Himalayas! In fact, Dona Amalia Ramirez may be intrigued to know that at least one of her family's travel worn creations has withstood the last two rocket attacks here in Iraq. It remains to be seen how well it will hold up long term with the almost total lack of humidity!* The classical guitar is capable of enchanting an audience small enough to fit beneath an umbrella or big enough to fill Dodger Stadium. Miniatures by Scarlatti or concertos by Rodrigo and all musical forms in between challenge performers and thrill listeners in every corner of the world!

Maestra Liona Boyd is in the vanguard of those who celebrate the classical guitar. How interesting to discover that her grandmother was also born in Linares, the home town of Andres Segovia. Performer, composer, transcriber, mentor and general ambassador to the world from the peaceful realm of the classical guitar, Maestra Liona has made ravishing contributions to the wealth of classical guitar performance material. In the footsteps of the troubadours, Liona has traveled extensively to place the gift of the classical guitar in the hearts of a diverse population of aficionados and neophytes, avid listeners all. She multiplies her generosity by inviting into her limelight a novel and diverse company of inspired guitarists from across the planet. The pulse of our lives is quickened and our souls are soothed.

Every guitarist who came after Don Antonio, just as every classical guitarist who has come after Segovia, has in a way been set free from the past, even from the personal methods of these two great caretakers. The great gift to their disciples was this freedom to pursue their own idea of the Dream. By this time, early in the twenty first millenium, there are many radical departures from Don Antonio's plantilla and Don Andres' style but none from the paradigm of beauty, allure and power. Now, more than ever, the classical guitar, whether the rare and costly culmination of a grand luthier's expert touch or the offspring of an assembly line, is enchanting in some intrinsic measure. The poems and songs of praise and adoration for Don Antonio's "dream made real" began with Francisco Tarrega's romantic offerings and continue to pour forth from the besotted and hopelessly smitten in an ever widening stream, vouchsafing an ever growing and maturing repertoire for the classical guitar. The great collective Dream of the Spaniards is now shared by the world, and the world, free to dream, can reaffirm John Keat's declaration that the indispensable Companions of our Lives such as the Classical Guitar, are:

*.....a friend to man, to whom thou sayest
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty-that is all
Ye need to know on earth, and all ye need to know".*