

Editor's Letter

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A YEAR HAS PASSED since *Soundboard Scholar* went fully online and free for all. The response testifies to a thriving scholarly guitar community: downloads of our articles have already exceeded sixteen thousand from ninety-five countries. Meanwhile, we have been enjoying the affordances of online publication — both the freedom to publish material whenever it is ready and the ability to present scholarship in alternative formats. I am thinking not only of the four video presentations that appear in this issue but also the substantial data set that accompanies Christopher Page's article on accompanied song in Victorian England, or the facsimile that accompanies Robert Coldwell's study of Legnani and Sagrini.

In this message, I will introduce the contents of this issue, but first, let me explain how we have come to include video presentations. During the COVID lockdown of 2020, our publisher, the Guitar Foundation of America, inaugurated a series of occasional online meetings called “Zoom Happy Hour for Guitar Scholars.” (These are open to all: for more information, write to sbs@guitarfoundation.org.) So far we have met nine times and visited a great diversity of subjects: the first meeting alone touched on cognition and the fretboard, Roberto Gerhard in exile, new music for classical ukulele, and the guitar as a vehicle of social and cultural history. Usually, these meetings take the form of spoken abstracts followed by informal discussion; on occasion, however, speakers have given full presentations, and we present four of them in this journal.

The first video, a recording of a webinar, deals with a topic we have long wanted to address in our happy-hour meetings: “The Guitar and the Musical Canon.” As has often been discussed, the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a standard repertoire, or canon, of exemplary compositions, a repertoire that privileged certain composers, instruments, genres, and values. As the canon began to solidify, the performers, teachers, and critics who disseminated it acquired an almost priestly status: it became their task to uphold the canon, transmit it, and preserve it — even to protect it, for as has often been noted, the canon has grown only a little since the nineteenth century: certainly, it includes no works for the guitar. To explore the guitar's problematic relationship to the canon, we invited five discussants who are known for their provocative approach to the instrument's history: Stephen Goss, Kathy Acosta

Zavala, Lorenzo Micheli, Michael O’Toole, and Christopher Page. Does the guitar have a canon of its own—either for the concert stage or the teaching studio? Can Segovia be said to have created one, however belatedly, in the early twentieth century? In what ways can the guitar engage with the classical canon through transcription?

The most pointed issue that the panelists debate is whether an instrument with the immense history and popularity of the guitar need even concern itself with the canon. To ask this question is to lift one’s gaze from the guitar as a vehicle for solo classical repertoire and to contemplate the guitar’s pervasive role in popular music as an accompaniment to dance and above all, the human voice. Three presentations and articles in this issue adopt this perspective.

In her lecture on the Brazilian singer and guitarist Olga Prager Coelho, Marcia Taborda shows how far removed are Coelho’s concerns from those of the canon, with its emphasis on instrumental music, originality, and timeless transcendence. Instead, we have her virtuosity as a self-accompanied singer, her skill as an arranger, her repertoire of folksongs from all over the world, and her involvement with politics, combined with her perspective as a woman.

Similarly, Christopher Page, in his study of the guitar in late-Victorian England, begins with another female singer and guitarist with a large repertoire, Leila Trapmann. To be sure, Trapmann is not a comparable figure to Coelho: as Page says, “she is not the kind of player whom historians of the guitar usually pause to consider.” And yet she is emblematic of the enormous—and hitherto unrecognized—popularity of the guitar in late-Victorian England as a companion to the voice. To capture the scope of this popularity, Page weaves together such topics as gender, language, performance practice, and the exotic—illuminated throughout with that distinct sense of place that some readers will recognize from his series of books on the guitar in England.

Accompanied song is again central to Wojciech Gurgul’s exploration of English and Russian guitars in Poland. While Gurgul is occupied first and foremost with sources, there is much that the general guitar scholar can learn from the background he provides throughout his discussion. When we think of nineteenth-century Poland, we might imagine a typical guitar culture dominated by the Spanish guitar, as in the music of Bobrowicz (who is discussed elsewhere in this issue in an article by Matanya Ophée). But the reality is far messier, for when the Spanish guitar was brought to Poland after the partitions, it had to coexist with the wire-strung English guitar, already incumbent in Polish music from at least the 1760s, and used primarily to accompany song and to play miniature dances. The English guitar was tuned to a chord of G major, pointing to possible connections with the Russian guitar, which was tuned in a similar way and, as Gurgul shows, was present in the region of Poland that was under Russian control.

Two other studies in this issue offer journeys of discovery. Robert Coldwell’s account of how he came to uncover Legnani’s missing opus 9 reminds us that even now, when it comes to the nineteenth century, we are still gathering data, and sheer curiosity is still to be rewarded. The French guitarist Louis Sagrini has attracted little attention from guitar historians, but while researching Sagrini’s career, Coldwell began to

wonder about a work by Legnani that Sagrini is documented to have played in Paris. His investigations led him to the work in question, a set of *Variations brillantes* by Legnani, published by Richault in Paris around 1825 or 1826 and, according to the title page, “performed in several concerts in Paris by Mr. Sagrini.” We include a facsimile of the work: the six variations follow a classical scheme of a rhythmic crescendo from the theme to the last variation (which is presumably played Allegro, faster than the Moderato of the theme and preceding variations). Just before the rhythmic crescendo is fulfilled, there is an elaborate Largo interlude in E major whose figuration harks back to the slow introduction. The Richault print contains many errors, including a missing D# in the key signature of this interlude.

Milton Mermikides’s virtuosic exploration of how the guitar’s fretboard can be conceptualized rather defies introduction, because of his unique style of presentation, in which insight and delight are almost synonymous: just witness the virtual guitar he demonstrates in his talk, an instrument that can be set immediately to any scordatura and whose fingerboard can be remapped in mind-boggling ways. The key idea, perhaps, is that Mermikides asks us to view the fretboard as a cognitive artifact, a tool that organizes complex knowledge and allows us to keep track of our thinking processes, whether we are composing, improvising, performing, or learning. His interest in showing how embodied knowledge can be cultivated, challenged, and enriched connects with the work of Jonathan De Souza, who wrote about guitar thinking in last year’s issue. It is fortunate that De Souza was present for Mermikides’s talk, and we have included the extensive discussion that followed in a separate video.

Last year, we began a new series devoted to scholarship in translation, beginning with four articles written originally in Portuguese. At the time of writing, we have two more translation projects in process. One is a series of articles by Spanish scholars about the guitar boom in early twentieth-century Spain: these articles will be published shortly as part of the next issue. The other project focuses on the early music revival and a two-volume collection of conference proceedings, *La luth et sa musique* (1958, 1984), featuring the work of leading scholars of the time. When my colleague Ellwood Colahan and I read through the lectures, we were both struck by how stimulating they are today. Take Kurt Dorfmueller’s introduction to German lute tablature, translated by Ellwood for this issue. This is the least well known of the Renaissance tablature systems — and the most forbidding — yet Dorfmueller shows how it served the pedagogy and repertoire of those who used it. The text includes the discussion that followed its original presentation, and there is a refreshing simplicity, even naivety, to this conversation among colleagues as they seek to establish the foundations of the lute’s repertoire, performance practice, and notation.

We also continue our series, “From the Soundboard Archive,” devoted to the work of those pioneering scholars who published their research in the GFA’s magazine *Soundboard* (this journal’s sister publication), long before Thomas Heck founded the peer-reviewed journal that you are reading now. We began the series last year with Peter Danner’s work on the American parlor guitar (five articles with a new introduction by Danner). This year we pay tribute to the towering figure of Matanya

Ophee, who would have been ninety years old in 2022 and who was the epitome of the self-made guitar historian. Guitarists of my age who were fortunate enough to know Matanya personally may recognize some of the jumble of impressions of him that I have retained. One day you might open a magazine or read an Internet post to find yourself harshly criticized; the next you might be at a festival having just experienced his personal warmth, holding a little pile of scores he had just published and offered you as a gift. As time passes, it's that warmth that I find stays with me the most. As for his scholarship, no matter the subject — Sor's reception in Russia, say, or the history of tablature transcription — he helped to lay its foundations with rigor and skepticism. It was no easy task to go through Ophee's many writings in *Soundboard* and make a collection that would give a flavor of his work, in part because he had already republished the most substantial pieces in his *Essays in Guitar History* (Columbus: Orphee, 2016), which came out in the year before his death. But Robert Coldwell had the happy idea that we might reprint some of the light introductions Ophee wrote to *Soundboard's* series "The Guitarist's Album." I am very grateful to Stanley Yates for making the final selection and writing an overview of Ophee's contributions to *Soundboard*.

For once, this issue contains no reviews of books or media: we will make up for this in the next issue. In the meantime, let me describe a hefty pile of five books that is currently on my desk (a couple of which were published in 2023, months after this letter *should* have been written). As I pick up one book and put another down, they seem to blend into one multi-volume work that explores a *pas de deux* of art and technology in which each takes turns to lead or follow.

Two books in the pile are about the instrument itself— collector's items that celebrate the history of the guitar as the integration of innovation and beauty: *The Renewed Guitar: The Instrument's Evolution Seen through Period Pictures (1775–1925)*, by Erik Pierre Hofmann and Stefan Hackl (Les Éditions des Robins, 2021), and *The Austin-Marie Collection and Compendium Book Set* (2022), by Jeff Wells. Two others provide insight into the outburst of creativity from players, composers, and luthiers in the early nineteenth century: *The Great Vogue for the Guitar in Western Europe: 1800–1840*, edited by Christopher Page, Paul Sparks, and James Westbrook (London: Boydell, 2023), and *Inventando la guitarra: Estudios sobre la primera generación de virtuosos-compositores del siglo XIX*, by Eduardo Fernández (Montevideo: Ediciones Universitarias, 2022; it can be downloaded for free). And a fifth explores the cutting edge: *21st Century Guitar: Evolutions and Augmentations*, edited by Richard Perks and John McGrath (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), is an anthology of essays about the state of the modern guitar in its acoustic and electric forms.

This list is only a personal one, of course. We would be delighted to publish news of new scholarly publications and upcoming colloquia on our site: you can send details to us at sbs@guitarfoundation.org.