

## Andrés Segovia: Champion of the Classical Guitar

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Today, the classical guitar is recognized as a legitimate concert instrument: it is taught in most major music schools and conservatories across the world, but it has not always been this way. Before the twentieth century, the guitar was viewed as a simple instrument, incapable of being played in more prestigious venues than bars. In the nineteenth century, a handful of guitarists attempted to change this view of the guitar, but they were all ultimately unsuccessful. Around the dawn of the twentieth century, a man by the name of Andrés Segovia decided to radically turn the guitar around and make it a prestigious concert instrument that could rival the violin or the piano. He used a variety of means to accomplish this: scheduling recitals in important venues to raise the public opinion, enlisting non-guitarists to compose new music for the instrument, transcribing important works by notable composers for the instrument, and convincing music schools and conservatories to teach the instrument at a high level. He was successful in all these means but ultimately failed to make the classical guitar as prominent an instrument as the violin or the piano. Andrés Segovia is the turning point for how the guitar is viewed in classical music.

The beginning of the nineteenth century was accompanied by two of the greatest and most well-known guitarist-composers: Fernando Sor and Mauro Giuliani, born in 1778 and 1781 respectively. These two guitarists composed a great multitude of studies and pieces that have found a permanent place in the guitar repertoire and were considered virtuosos of the instrument. Pieces such as Sor's *Grand Solo, Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart*; and Giuliani's *Grande Overture* and *Sonata Eroica in A* are considered outstanding pieces of music and are performed in a multitude of recitals today. Even before their deaths, however, the guitar had fallen out of the limelight that it had enjoyed for

a few decades and reverted to being a common street instrument that was not capable of playing sophisticated music. Sor and Giuliani's impact on the overall legacy of the guitar was not enough for it to gain access to schools and concert halls across the world. The largest contributor to the downfall of the guitar at this time is the same reason that had plagued the guitar since its inception: the lack of serious repertoire outside of famous virtuoso guitarist-composers such as Sor and Giuliani. Berlioz was very fond of the instrument, but stated that "it is almost impossible to write well for the guitar without being a player on the instrument."<sup>1</sup> He notes that even some guitarist-composers write in a very limiting way for the instrument, so that its full potential is not truly realized outside of the works of the master guitarist-composers.<sup>2</sup> Because of the perceived limitations of the instrument, the guitar fell back into obscurity with no one to forge a new frontier. The guitar was seemingly stuck in its ways, and without drastic change, it would remain outside of the world of classical music.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, it seemed that the guitar might finally have a champion to bring it up to the level of instruments such as the piano or the violin. This hopeful savior of the guitar was Francisco Tárrega. Born in 1852 in Villareal, Valencia, and dying in Barcelona, Spain in 1909 he greatly advanced both the repertoire and the technique of the guitar. Tárrega's impact on the guitar can be seen by every classical guitarist today. He contributed a great many pieces to the repertoire such as *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* and *Lágrima*, as well as doing something that no one else had ever truly attempted to do: He transcribed music from great composers for the guitar. Outside of the compositions of Sor and Giuliani, there was very little good, challenging, and intricate music written for the guitar. Tárrega transcribed music from legendary composers for other instruments like J. S. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Haydn, and Mozart, to name just a few. Since no one at the time was writing respectable music for the guitar, Tárrega took the lead in writing his own works that could showcase the potential of the instrument and showing that the music of the greats could indeed be played on the guitar. He transcribed pieces such as Bach's *Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Minor* and Chopin's *Clair de lune* and *Nocturne No. 2, Op. 9*. These have become the definitive editions of those pieces for the guitar and are a testament of Tárrega's compositional prowess.

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<sup>1</sup> Turnbull, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Turnbull, 87.

Tárrega's influence on the technique of the instrument can also not be understated. Tárrega standardized the posture that one takes while playing, with the guitar resting on the elevated left leg, and he established the *apoyando* stroke, in which the nail strikes the string and rests on the string immediately above the sounding string. This was done by the complete abandonment of resting the little finger on the body of the guitar to reduce the movement of the right hand when changing positions to play in either *apoyando* stroke or *tirando*, which is a free stroke that does not rest on the string after plucking it. The largest controversy of the legacy Tárrega left on the guitar is whether to play with nails or not. He began his career by using the fingernail, but near the end of his life, he cut his nails and established a way of playing without the nails to produce an even more clear sound than before. Unfortunately, he was never able to teach his pupils this technique and so his students continued to play with nails. They did go on to be fairly prominent names in the world of the guitar, among them Miguel Llobet and Emilio Pujol. Tárrega did not possess any higher motivation to bring the guitar to the level of a respected classical instrument, and so, even though Llobet, Pujol, and others went on to have moderately successful careers, the revival of the guitar ended in 1909 until Andrés Segovia finished the work that Tárrega started.

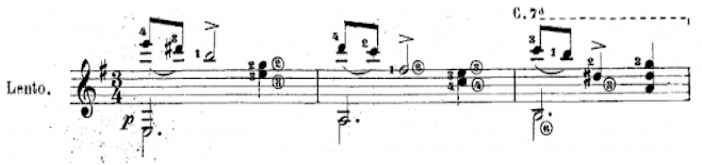
The lack of large-scale works and the absence of any guitarist-composer willing to write them made it seem likely that the guitar would follow the cycle that it had for the previous four centuries: to be elevated for a little while before falling back to being a popular folk instrument, fit only for the playing of unsophisticated music. Despite Tárrega's significant influence on the progression of the instrument, he embodies this issue well. His pupil, Emilio Pujol remarked that, "We do not want to see in Tárrega the professional composer; not in someone who had pinned his greatest ambition on his creative powers."<sup>3</sup> Although Tárrega was a very talented performer and composer, he lacked the necessary ambition that the guitar needed to be permanently raised from its lowly position and its true potential realized. Although Tárrega was a great performer, he did not like the life of a concert performer, and he even turned down an opportunity to tour in America and left a tour across Europe unfinished to return home. Although Tárrega's compositions contained beautiful showings of his melodic and harmonic intuitions (See Example 1), he

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<sup>3</sup> Rius, 11.

did not leave many large-scale works that would benefit the guitar in the long term.

**Example 1:** Mm. 1–3 of *Adelita* by Francisco Tárrega.<sup>4</sup>



Although Tárrega had a handful of students whom he taught well, he did not make a method that could be passed down through the generations, and so his school eventually died. Tárrega was proficient enough in several areas that, if he had possessed the proper ambition, Segovia would not have been hailed as the savior of the guitar, but he would have been just one more in a line of prominent and influential guitarists. There is a poem that was written by Vicente Sarthou Carreres in memory of Tárrega upon his death, and the words speak of the great artistry that he possessed but also serve as a sort of prophecy of the fate of the guitar after Tárrega's death. The final stanza of the poem goes, "Since then [Tárrega's death], the poor guitar / now does not leave the sad corner / where it lies, forgotten by everyone, / in the obscurity that pain inspires."<sup>5</sup> Tárrega's life and influence are of paramount importance when examining the ultimate rise of the guitar, as one must clearly see how the guitar sat forgotten by classical musicians until the rise of the self-proclaimed savior of the guitar, Andrés Segovia.

Andrés Segovia is now recognized as one of the most important figures in the entire history of the guitar. He dedicated his entire life to raising the perception of the guitar to that of the piano or the violin. Although he did not quite achieve that goal, Segovia was successful in bringing the guitar at least into the same musical sphere of those instruments so that they can be performed together and studied in conservatories together. Segovia was born in Linares, Andalusia, which is an autonomous community in the south of Spain. He was born on February 21, 1893, and he died on June 2, 1987. In his childhood, he was discouraged by his parents, especially his father, in his studies of the guitar, but his uncle allowed him to practice in secret. Segovia continued practicing and soon

<sup>4</sup> Tárrega, *Adelita*, mm. 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> Rius Espinos, 241.

left his home to move to Granada and Córdoba, where he performed a couple of small concerts on the guitar. He fell in love with the instrument, and he declared in his autobiography, “I had been captured for life by the guitar. With complete dedication, I have been totally faithful to it all my life. Faithful only to the guitar.”<sup>6</sup> Segovia continued his travels across Spain, and ended in Madrid, where he befriended Manuel Ramírez, a famous guitar luthier, and performed his first professional debut on his Ramírez guitar in 1909 to mild reviews. Over time, Segovia gained more traction as a performer and began performing throughout Spain and was eventually requested to play for Queen Victoria, who proclaimed he played, “like a music box!”<sup>7</sup> By the end of his life, Segovia had performed in all of Europe, in the United States, and throughout South America, and he was recognized as a world-class performer who had totally changed the perception of the guitar.

In order for Segovia to become known as the savior of the guitar, he had to accomplish great tasks and work endlessly towards his goal. His accomplishments can be succinctly stated as broadening the repertoire of the guitar and presenting the instrument to as wide an audience as possible.<sup>8</sup> Segovia, later in his life, stated that he had five goals that he wished to accomplish with the guitar: to broaden the repertoire with non-guitarist-composers, to raise it above its current status as a folk instrument, to make the guitar known to the philharmonic public worldwide, to create a medium for guitarists to become involved in, and to place the guitar in conservatories around the world.<sup>9</sup> These are five monumental tasks, and they were all successfully accomplished by Segovia in his lifetime.

The first goal that Segovia had, broadening the repertoire of the guitar, was done in primarily two ways: promoting new works for the instrument, and transcribing old works not originally written for the guitar. Although Tárrega transcribed a good number of works for the guitar, Segovia was not completely satisfied with them and so he edited some of Tárrega’s transcriptions and wrote his own transcriptions, the most famous being the “Chaconne” from J. S. Bach’s *Violin Partita No. 2* BWV 1004 (See Examples 2 and 3 for comparison). Segovia transcribed and edited works by over fifty composers, many of whom

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<sup>6</sup> Segovia, *Autobiography*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Segovia, *Autobiography*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Turnbull, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Wade, 114-117.

did not write any works for the guitar.<sup>10</sup> The combination of Tárrega and Segovia’s transcriptions allowed many of the most popular composers from every century of music history to be relevant for guitarists, and it allowed for non-guitarists to enjoy the music of some of the most influential composers to be heard on such a beautiful instrument as the guitar.

**Example 2:** Segovia’s transcription of “Chaconne” from *Violin Partita No. 2*, mm. 1–11.<sup>11</sup>



**Example 3:** Bach’s original composition of “Chaconne” from *Violin Partita No. 2*, mm. 1–11.<sup>12</sup>



The other method that Segovia used to broaden the repertoire was to perform and advocate new works for the guitar. Segovia was very particular about which composers whose music he would add to his repertoire and has even been criticized for his frugality in his support of rising composers. However, this aspect of Segovia’s career cannot be understated in how influential it was for the continued development of the repertoire and attention it received from other musicians. Silvio José dos Santos compiled a non-comprehensive list of compositions that Segovia commissioned from fourteen composers, as well as explanations

<sup>10</sup> Wade, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Segovia, “Chaconne,” 9.

<sup>12</sup> Bach, “Chaconne,” 32.

that Segovia might have had for each of them. Santos claims that the list that he had compiled from the Segovia Archives represents what Segovia was striving towards and is “indispensable to the scholarship related to Segovia's contribution to the guitar as well as the history of guitar music in the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> Santos’s list showcases exactly what Segovia was looking for when he supported a work by a new composer. Segovia learned from the Romantic style and was avidly against any notion of twentieth-century modernism in music, and so he did not support any music written by a modernist composer. As an example, Igor Stravinsky wanted to write for the guitar, but Segovia refused to perform it as he feared it would be too modernist, and so Stravinsky never contributed to the repertoire.<sup>14</sup> Segovia wanted to craft a specific repertoire for the guitar that reflected his personal taste in music, and for this he has been rightly criticized, yet his work in compiling a standard repertoire for the guitar remains of utmost importance. Segovia’s exclusivity with which he promoted new music was another facet with which he promoted the guitar, even if it was not intentional. It became a sort of privilege to compose for Segovia, and so composers like Stravinsky were drawn to him, thereby drawing attention to the guitar as well.

With the new repertoire that he had now established, Segovia was able to do what he had set out to do from the beginning: he was now able to elevate the public opinion of the guitar through concerts. One of the largest challenges that he faced was to be able to produce enough sound to fill a large concert hall. According to his autobiography, Segovia tested the acoustics of his guitar by playing in an empty hall and having his friend sit in various places around the hall to test if he could hear the sound.<sup>15</sup> Proving that the guitar was capable of being heard even in the largest halls, he toured Spain, Europe, and eventually the Americas, where he was met with very favorable reviews. Segovia was a master interpreter of music, and many of his reviews show this. There is a review written after one of his performances in San Francisco that states, “His interpretive gifts are such that he can endow even the most trivial of salon pieces with musical meaning.”<sup>16</sup> Segovia had set up a very large caricature of himself as a performer. He commanded complete silence from his audience, and if someone even merely coughed, he would stop playing to reprimand the offender. Segovia was a master of the concert

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<sup>13</sup> Dos Santos, 207.

<sup>14</sup> O’Toole, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Segovia, *Autobiography*, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, 16.

stage, and his prowess was incredibly well known so that even in his aging years he played sold-out concerts. A review of the ninety-three-year-old Segovia in New York states, "Mr. Segovia's ability to enthrall an audience remains virtually intact in spite of the deterioration of his technical resources and that is reason to honor both the musician and the listeners who are able to recognize his continued value to the musical world."<sup>17</sup>

Segovia was clearly a great performer on the guitar. Despite reviews written in his later years criticizing his faulty technique, Segovia really did perfect technique on the guitar. Julian Bream, acclaimed English guitarist prior to Segovia once commented, "There's never been a technique of such precision and control before Segovia and it would be remarkable if there would be in the future a superior technique."<sup>18</sup> It is truly incredible that Segovia played with such incredible technique, when it is considered that he was entirely self-taught, but Segovia's work in perfecting the technique on the guitar cannot be understated. Unfortunately, Segovia either never saw fit to make a method book so that he could pass down his technique firsthand, or he simply never got around to this, but videos of his performances inspire deep study in many students as they attempt to glean informational instruction through viewing. Aside from being a phenomenal musician and interpreter, Segovia became involved with a publication called *The Guitar Review*, which was a scholarly journal first published in New York in 1946. It discussed numerous matters involving the guitar, and Segovia's autobiography was initially published through this.<sup>19</sup> This publication allowed for the academic world to get involved with the guitar and for those unfamiliar with the instrument to become acquainted with the movement that Segovia had started.

Segovia's career as a performer on the classical guitar took the world by storm. His obituary in *The Musical Times* highlights his accomplishments from his debut in Madrid at the age of sixteen until the end of his life.<sup>20</sup> Segovia proved that the guitar was indeed capable of being a powerful enough instrument that it could hold its own on the concert stage, contrary to the beliefs of many music critics and

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<sup>17</sup> Henahan, "Segovia Performs at Fisher Hall."

<sup>18</sup> Wade, 86-87.

<sup>19</sup> Wade, 117.

<sup>20</sup> *The Musical Times* no. 1735, 511.

performers. Segovia's efforts led to the composition of multiple concertos by Rodrigo, Todesco, and Ponce. The composition of modern concertos along with the new repertoire for the guitar led to the guitar being recognized as an instrument capable of holding its own in the philharmonic world.

The last of Segovia's major accomplishments was the widespread introduction of the classical guitar into the curricula of schools and universities. Although he never personally held a position in a school, Segovia's artistry and performance mastery and the deepening of the repertoire opened the possibility for guitar to be studied as thoroughly as the piano or the violin. Since Segovia, the standard of guitar performance has risen dramatically, and the pedagogical techniques being used are more akin to other classical instruments in higher education.<sup>21</sup> In 1981, six years before Segovia's death, nearly all of the forty-three performers at the Segovia International Guitar Competition had pursued study at a conservatory, university, or some other institution.<sup>22</sup> Part of Segovia's accomplishment of allowing the guitar to be studied at a higher level was to request new compositions from non-guitarist composers. Before, the guitar was never studied by budding composers, and as such, they had no idea what was appropriate for the instrument, but Segovia enlisted many composers into this new line of composition and made changes where they were needed. This resulted in the guitar becoming prominent enough for composers to study what works on the instrument and fueled a desire for new music to be written for it. Despite the primary composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries passing by the instrument, Segovia's influence has sparked interest in many composers and has caused many wonderful compositions to be written in a wide variety of genres.

In the thirty-seven years since his death, Segovia has been elevated to a legendary status as a self-proclaimed apostle of the guitar. There are some scholars who question whether Segovia was really what he claimed to be, or if he merely painted a caricature of himself. Luis Achondo argues that Segovia did not advance the technique of the guitar as he claims to have,<sup>23</sup> that he merely lived at just the right moment in time to take advantage of the movement of the guitar,<sup>24</sup> and that he used his own

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<sup>21</sup> Wade, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Wade, 118.

<sup>23</sup> Achondo, 309.

<sup>24</sup> Achondo, 312-313.

autobiography and other publications to rewrite history in his favor.<sup>25</sup> All of these arguments could be true, but without Segovia's personality and drive, it is fair to say that the guitar would have stayed as it was during Tárrega's career, if not falling back to being a simple accompaniment instrument.

While some critics of Segovia look at his life and his past as they criticize him, some look to the future that he laid out for the guitar. Michael O'Toole criticizes Segovia for his strict traditionalism and unwillingness to perform or support modernist music and composers.<sup>26</sup> He believes that Segovia stopped short, and if he had gotten his way, the guitar was in danger of falling away again. O'Toole looks to Segovia's 'heir', John C. Williams, who has since gone past the boundaries that Segovia had set. He has explored modernist music and popular music, as well as non-Western styles of music such as African, aboriginal, and Japanese music. Before his death, Segovia expressed his dismay regarding Williams's artistic statements.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Williams's career has advanced how the guitar is played and written for in a way that never would have been possible with Segovia's conservatism.

Despite all the varying opinions of Segovia's legacy and whether or not he was all that he claimed to be for the guitar, he is the most important figure in the history of the guitar. Segovia's accomplishments greatly impacted the guitar and its advancements in the world of classical music. Because Segovia expanded the repertoire of the guitar, raised the public opinion of the guitar, introduced the instrument to the philharmonic world, created a medium for guitarists to connect, and placed the guitar in higher education, he is easily the most influential figure in the history of the guitar, and is clearly the turning point for how the guitar is viewed in the world of classical music.

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<sup>25</sup> Achondo, 323.

<sup>26</sup> O'Toole, 23-24.

<sup>27</sup> O'Toole, 195.

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