

FROM THE SOUNDBOARD ARCHIVE

Notes on Some Early-American Guitar Concerts

PETER DANNER (1977)

IN STUDYING THE MUSIC OF THE PAST, it is often valuable to understand something about the occasion for which a specific work was composed or about the environment in which it was first heard.¹ Far too little information is currently available concerning the programs and activities of most nineteenth century guitarists.² This is particularly true in regard to concert life in the United States. Indeed, the contributions of nineteenth century American guitar composers have never been adequately evaluated. In the following article, several random scraps of information are offered in the hope that they will stimulate guitarists to search out, not only music from the past worth saving, but material dealing with musical activities as well.

Before the 1880s, solo recitals were almost never heard of. Even celebrated performers such as Liszt were expected to share the bill with other instrumentalists, vocalists, and entire symphony orchestras. Guitarists appeared at public concerts in the United States at least as early as the 1770s. Accounts of such performances, however, are usually very sketchy. Most of what we know about eighteenth century concert life in America is the result of Oscar Sonneck's pioneering research. Much of the following information is based directly on his findings.

Formal concerts were uncommon in the colonies. Much more typical were *soirées* such as the one advertised in the *Pennsylvania Journal* of June 15, 1774:

GRAND CONCERT & BALL, at the Assembly Room in Lodge Alley, on Friday the 17th of June, 1774, for the benefit of Signier *Sodi*, first dancing master of the Opera in Paris and London, in which Mr. Vidal who has been a musician of the Chambers of the King of Portugal will play on divers instruments of music.

- 1 Some of the information in this article appears in a different form in an article on American guitar music to be published in *Il Fronimo*, Milan. [See Peter Danner, "Breve storia della musica per chitarra in America," *Il Fronimo*, no. 80 (1977): 18–25.]
- 2 Two notable exceptions are Thomas Heck's research on Giuliani and Brian Jeffery's forthcoming work on Fernando Sor.

FIRST ACT.

1. A Symphony. 2. Mr. Vidal will play a Sonatta on the Guitare Italian, with the violin. 3. A Symphony. 4. Mr. Vidal will play a duette on the mandoline, accompanied with violin. 5. First Act will finish with a march composed by Mr. Vidal.

SECOND ACT.

1. A Symphony. 2. Mr. Vidal will play a capriccio on the guitar. 3. A Symphony. 4. Mr. Vidal will play a duette on the psaltery, and a minuet imitating the echo. 5. Second act will end with another march composed by Mr. Vidal.

After the concert, Signier Sodi will dance a louvre and a minuet with Miss Sodi; then a new Philadelphia cotillion composed by Signior Sodi. Miss Sodi will also dance a rigadon and minuet with Mr. Hulett. A new cotillion; then the allemande by Miss Sodi and Mr. Hulett; also Signior Sodi will danse [sic] a jigge, afterwards Mr. Hulett will dance a hornpipe and to finish with a ball for the company.³

The multifaceted Mr. Vidal was probably identical with the guitarist B. Vidal mentioned by both Fétis and Eitner. No other American appearance by Vidal is known. Is the reference to “Guitar Italian” an indication of the six-string guitar’s origin?

One of the most intriguing early guitarists was Henri Capron, who, like Vidal, performed on “divers” instruments. Fétis mentions him as an “able violinist and one of the best pupils of Gaviniés,” who performed at the Concert Spirituel in Paris in 1768. He later came to Philadelphia where he set himself up as an impresario, performer, and teacher. In his announcement of a concert to be held at the City Tavern in Philadelphia on March 6, 1787, Capron was not above advertising himself as a guitar teacher in the true spirit of free capitalism.

PLAN OF THE CONCERT

ACT I

Symphonie.Stamitz
Song. Reinagle
Concerto VioloncelloCapron

ACT II

Grand SymphonieVanhall
Concerto ViolinCramer
Sonata GuitarreCapron
Overture, Rose et Colas

3 O. G. Sonneck, *Early Concert-life in America, 1731–1800* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907), 76.

ACT III

Concerto Flute Fiolla
Sonata Piano Forte Reinagle
Overture Stamitz.

Mr. Capron respectfully informs the public that he instructs ladies and gentlemen in the art of singing and of playing on the Spanish and English guitars, recording the most approved method of the first masters in Europe. . . .

The guitar, from the late improvement which it has received, being so portable and so easily kept in order, is now considered not only as a desirable but as a fashionable instrument.⁴

Capron’s remark about the guitar’s “late improvement” is of particular interest. Undoubtedly, this is a reference to the six-string guitar which was just evolving in Europe. During the entire period from 1770 to 1820, it is often difficult to judge just what is meant by “guitar.” The word applied just as easily to the cittern or to the English guitar as it did to the six-string or “Spanish” guitar. The former instruments were both strung with wire strings and played with a plectrum. The English guitar was tuned to an open C major chord: C, E, G, c, e, g, and was extremely popular at the end of the eighteenth century. Even after the decline of the English guitar in the 1820s, pieces written in open tunings continued to be popular in both England and America.⁵

Capron either made mileage out of his “Sonata Guittare” or else it met with considerable audience approval. It appears to have been performed again on May 29, 1787, at a benefit concert held by one “Mr. Juhan.” This concert is of interest as it was attended by none other than George Washington, as is known from his diary: “accompanied Mrs. Morris to the benefit concert of a Mr. Juhan.”⁶ A third reference to a “Sonata Guitar” by Capron occurred during a concert given January 31, 1788, at the fortnightly City Concert given in the City Tavern.⁷ During this performance, Capron performed not only on the guitar but the cello as well. Unfortunately, Capron’s guitar music does not appear to have survived.

Another Philadelphia guitarist of some interest was one “Mr. Cassignard, amateur.” An announcement in the *Philadelphia Ledger* stated that he would perform “several pieces of his composition on the guitar” at a concert in the College Hall on May 29, 1792.⁸ Also appearing on the bill were a French horn player and an amateur harpist.

4 Sonneck, 130.

5 Among numerous examples, see Henry Worrall’s piece *Sebastopol*, the first page of which is reproduced in the *Soundboard*, 2, no. 2 (May 1975): 28. [The entire work is reproduced on the website of the Kansas Historical Society, <https://www.kansasmemory.org/item/208635>. For a thorough discussion of Worrall’s life and work, see Robert Ferguson, “Henry Worrall (1825–1902): Anglo-American Guitarist,” *Soundboard Scholar*, no. 2 (2016): 4–19.]

6 Sonneck, *Early Concert-life*, 131.

7 Sonneck, 86.

8 Oscar Sonneck and William Upton, *A Bibliography of Early Secular American Music* (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, 1945), 170.

On June 16th of the same year “Monsieur Cassignard, Professor of guitar” appeared during a concert “at Mr. O’Eillers Hotel.”

A quaint announcement of an “orchestry” concert held in New York in May 1774 includes music for both guitar and mandolin. The announcement originally appeared in the *New York Mercury* for May 9, 1774:

MUSIC. On Tuesday Evening the 17th instant will be performed at Mr. Hull’s Tavern, for the use of Mr. Caze, an extraordinary instrumental and vocal *Concert* in two acts, consisting of different solos, upon various instruments, unknown in this country, to be executed by the gentlemen of the Harmonic Society, who have been pleased to promise their assistance.

1ST ACT.

A Grand Orchestry’s Symphony
A French Ariette will be sung accompanied with the guitar and violin
Mr. Caze will play his own composed music, on the violin with Mr. Zedtwitz.
A Concert on the Flute
A Sonada [sic] on the Spanish Guitar
The first Act to end with a March.

IID ACT.

A Grand Orchestry’s Symphonie
A French Ariette accompany’d with the Mandolin and Violin
A Solo on the Violin
A Duo on Mandolin and Violin
A Sonada of the Salterio; and d’Exaudet’s Minuet with echos.
The Concert to finish with a March of the grand Orchestry.
After the Concert there will be a ball.⁹

In the *City Gazette* of Charleston, South Carolina, for December 16, 1795, an advertisement was placed for a concert at William’s coffee-house to be held the next day by Mr. Le Roy. At the foot of the program is the following statement:

N.B. Between the acts, Mr. Le Roy will perform several pieces on the Spanish guitar. . . .
Silence is requested during the performance.¹⁰

During the concert itself, Le Roy performed a “Concerto on the basse” by Pleyel. Typical of early nineteenth century concerts featuring the guitar was one given May 21, 1823, at the Eagle Hotel in Richmond, Virginia. Among the five performers was Mr. S. Milon, who taught piano, guitar, and voice in Richmond, “being himself,

⁹ Sonneck, *Early Concert-life*, 175.

¹⁰ Sonneck, 32.

an Italian and pupil of the celebrated Conservatory in Naples.” The program is quoted here in its entirety.¹¹

Mrs. Sully’s vocal and instrumental concert at the Eagle Hotel, 1823.

PART 1ST.

Symphony	<i>Haydn.</i>
Song, Flow, flow Cubanna,	Mr. Milon.
Favorite Scotch Airs on the piano forte	Mrs. Sully
Romance, La Rose a lagonic, accompanied on the guitar	Mr. Milon.
Favorite Air, “Huntsman Rest,” Piano, Harp and Flute	Mrs., Miss and Mr. Sully
Variations on the Violin Friend of my soul	Mr. Milon.
Concertante, Piano Forte with accompaniments	<i>Kalkbrenner.</i>

PART 2ND.

Symphony	<i>Haydn.</i>
Sonata, Harp with Violin accompaniment,	<i>Naderman.</i>
Italian Cavatina, composed by the celebrated Mr. Milon.	Miss Sully and Mr. Berg.
Favorite Tyrolese, Song of Liberty, arranged as a duet for Piano Forte	<i>Rossini.</i>
Fantasia and Variation for the Guitar	Mr. and Miss Sully.
Favorite Airs of Mrs. McDonald and Ye banks and Braes,	Mr. Milon.
The Whole to conclude with a grand Concerto for two Piano Fortes, with accompaniments, composed by <i>Mozart.</i>	Mrs. Sully.
	Mr. and Miss Sully.

The entire program has an informal flavor to it, with much of the music seemingly improvised or arranged for the occasion. As with most early nineteenth-century American concerts, the vast majority of the music was European in origin; Rossini was a great favorite, as were songs invoking a Scottish flavor.

Guitarists continued to be heard occasionally at the Eagle Hotel concerts. An announcement in the *Richmond Compiler* of March 6, 1829, lists “Miss George’s concert of vocal and instrumental music,” during which the audience heard a “Ballad

¹¹ Albert Stoutamire, *Music of the Old South* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 267–68.

by Barnett” with “Mrs. Gill, Light Guitar, accompanied on the Spanish Guitar by Mr. Andre.” The “Light” guitar referred to, of course, was one of the various harp-guitars popularized in England by Edward Light about 1800. Later in the same program, Mr. Andre teamed up with one “Mr. Parnell” to play a Fantasia for Violin and Guitar by Kuffner.¹²

Perhaps the first European concert guitarist to perform in the United States was the Spanish guitarist and vocalist A. F. Huerta y Katuria (1804–75), author of the famous Spanish national hymn *Himno de Riego* (or *March of Riego*, as it is sometimes titled). Huerta visited the United States at the age of twenty and appeared in New York with the orchestra of the old Philharmonic Society in the spring of 1824. The concert was held in the City Hotel, and the entire program was announced in the *National Advocate* of May 15, 1824:¹³

Mr. Huerta’s Concert, under the Patronage of the Philharmonic Society, this evening,
at 8 o’clock.

1ST PART.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Overture, full Orchestra | Rossini. |
| 2. Concerto, Guitar, Huerta, | Huerta. |
| 3. Song, by Mr. Milon. | |
| 4. Solo on the Flute, Amon. | Mr. Kinsela. |
| 5. Variations on the Guitar, Sor. | Huerta |

2D PART.

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| 1. Overture full orchestra. | |
| 2. Spanish March, with variations, Huerta | Mr. Huerta. |
| 3. Song by Mr. Milon, | |
| 4. Solo on the Violin, by Mr. Gillingham. | |
| 5. Divertimento on the Guitar, Huerta | Mr. Huerta. |

A reviewer in the *National Advocate* of May 18, 1824, wrote that he had “listened with great surprise and gratification to the execution and effect produced by Signor Huerta.”¹⁴ The “Spanish March” was probably Huerta’s Riego; what, one wonders, was the Sor piece? Might it have been the American debut of the famous “Mozart Variations”? The “Mr. Milon” who appeared as vocal soloist was doubtless the same musician who appeared in the Richmond concert cited above. Indeed, it may have been Milon who arranged Huerta’s performances in New York. As most soloists did,

¹² Stoutamire, 271.

¹³ Delmer D. Rogers, “Public Music Performances in New York City from 1800 to 1850,” *Anuario Interamericano de Investigación Musical* 6 (1970): 15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779924>.

¹⁴ Rogers, 15.

Huerta announced that he would teach during his stay in the city. He is known to have remained in New York until at least October 6, 1824.

Among other well-known European guitarists to visit the United States was Marc Aurelio Zani de Ferranti, who gave a successful American tour in 1846 with Paganini's celebrated violin pupil Ernesto Camillo Sivori. Paganini himself had toured with Sivori, giving violin and guitar concerts, and it is more than likely that Paganini compositions appeared on their programs.

Surprisingly, it is more difficult to obtain information about concerts held after 1840 than before. The principal reason is that newspapers (or their advertisers) ceased to run details of the programs in the daily press. Perhaps by 1840 American concert life had become so active with the founding of numerous orchestras and societies that there was no longer room to print details of any but the most important performances. Nevertheless, it is likely that a study of period newspapers would reward the patient researcher with numerous details of nineteenth century concert life. A cursory examination of San Francisco records, for example, has yielded the information that the great San Francisco guitarist Manuel Y. Ferrer appeared there at least as early as September 18, 1854, when he gave a concert at the Metropolitan Theater in that city.¹⁵ Further study, perhaps, would unearth more details.



“Notes on Some Early American Guitar Concerts” was first published in *Soundboard* 4, no. 1 (1977): 8–9, 21. The text is unchanged except for minor typographical corrections.

This article is part of a series, “From the *Soundboard* Archive,” featuring reprints of articles by Peter Danner on the guitar in the United States, c. 1770–c. 1924. For an introduction to the series, including links to each of the reprints, see <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/sbs/vol7/iss1/7>.

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¹⁵ Cornel Longyel, ed., *Celebrities in El Dorado 1850–1906*, History of Music in San Francisco Series, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Work Projects Administration, 1940), 162.

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About the Author

PETER DANNER attended the first meeting of the Guitar Foundation of America in Santa Barbara (1973), at which time he was representing the Lute Society of America. He edited that society's journal between 1975 and 1982 and served as its president between 1977 and 1982. He was elected to the GFA board of directors in 1975 and served as its chairman between 1977 and 1985, at which point he stepped down from the chairmanship to take over as chief editor of *Soundboard* from Jim Forrest. He continued as *Soundboard* editor until 2001, when he resigned the post for personal reasons. Peter was thus an eyewitness to the Guitar Foundation through its formative years and contributed as a lecturer, coordinator, and adjudicator at many of the Foundation's events.

Peter is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and holds a PhD in music history from Stanford University (1967). He pursued an active performing career in the early seventies but abandoned this to concentrate on teaching, writing, and family. For many years he taught at Menlo College in Menlo Park, California, where he devised an innovative course in music appreciation, meant more to teach the vocabulary of music than instill a love for Haydn (let alone Schoenberg) string quartets to an audience not prepared to accept them. Peter is now retired but still involves himself in his twin loves of music and history. He has too many CDs of classical music (guitar and otherwise) and sees to it that they're not neglected. He involves himself in the local history of the San Francisco Bay Area, which, being Silicon Valley, has seen changes that would have been unimaginable fifty years ago.

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