

FROM THE SOUNDBOARD ARCHIVE

The Guitar in Nineteenth-Century America

A Lost Social Tradition

PETER DANNER (1985)

SINCE THE AMERICAN BICENTENNIAL a decade ago, this writer has made several attempts to determine the role of the guitar in nineteenth-century American musical life and to identify the kinds of music played by American guitarists of the past.¹ A vast quantity of guitar music was published in the United States during the last century—solos, songs with written-out accompaniment, and methods—but together with the names of its composers and arrangers, it has all but vanished from our collective consciousness. Much of this music is clearly inferior when judged by today's standards, but regardless of its quality, its quantity cannot be denied.

There is no way the actual size of this repertoire can be accurately determined. One useful gauge of the amount of guitar music in print in 1870, at least, is *The Complete Catalogue of Sheet Music and Musical Works* published that year by the Board of Music Trade of the United States.² This catalogue lists all music in print from twenty of the major American publishing houses, including Oliver Ditson, Lee & Walker, William A. Pond, and John Church, and shows 726 entries for solo guitar, 2,309 songs with written-out guitar accompaniment, and thirty-four guitar methods. Many hundreds of additional titles would have been available from publishers not belonging to the Board of Trade or available through import. Furthermore, 1870 was not a peak year for American guitar activity, and the catalogue obviously does not include the countless titles that had passed from print by 1870 or had yet to appear.³ From the

- 1 See, for example, "Notes on Some Early-American Guitar Concerts," *Soundboard* 4, no. 1 (February 1977): 8–9, 21; reprinted with minor revisions in *Soundboard Scholar*, no. 7 (2021), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/sbs/vol7/iss1/8>; "Breve storia della musica per chitarra in America," *Il Fronimo*, no. 20 (July 1977); "Guitar," in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, vol. 2, ed. Stanley Sadie and H. Wiley Hitchcock (London: Macmillan, 1986): 296–98.
- 2 Board of Music Trade of the United States of America, *Complete Catalogue of Sheet Music and Musical Works, 1870*, with a new introduction by Dena J. Epstein (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).
- 3 An informal survey of some five hundred imprints suggests that the 1840s and 1880s may have been the decades of greatest guitar publishing in the United States. The Civil War may explain the interruption.

1830s until the turn of the century, the publication of guitar music in America was at least a semi-lucrative proposition with a relatively steady market.

Most writers on the guitar have ignored this repertoire entirely. What little has been written either attempts to relate it somehow to the classical guitar tradition in Europe or tries to identify it with American folk music. In my opinion, both these approaches give a mistaken impression of the place of the guitar in nineteenth-century American society. The place of the guitar belongs neither to art music nor to the folk tradition, but to the world of popular music.

In his valuable book *Yesterdays*, Charles Hamm defines popular song as a piece of music that (among other things) is:

- usually first performed and popularized in some form of secular stage entertainment and afterwards consumed (performed or listened to) in the home;
- composed and marketed with the goal of financial gain;
- designed to be performed by and listened to by persons of limited musical training and ability;
- and produced and disseminated in physical form — as sheet music in its early history and in various forms of mechanical reproduction in the twentieth century.⁴

While there were attempts to write art music for the guitar in the United States during the nineteenth century (some of them fairly sophisticated), the majority of guitar music, be it song or solo, fits this definition of “popular song” remarkably well. As far as folk music is concerned, the guitar did not become a significant folk instrument until the present century, when steel strings had become the predominant medium.

It is easy to see why American guitar music from the past has become confused with art music on the one hand and with folk music on the other. As in Europe, many early pieces of popular music were based on themes by Bellini, Donizetti, and other composers we would today label “classical.” Furthermore, the styles and harmonic vocabularies of art and popular music in the early nineteenth century were much closer to one another than they were later to become. Beethoven, for example, might write an “Eroica” Symphony, but he was not above turning out salon pieces such as *Für Elise* and *Minuet in G*.

The rise in popularity of the guitar in America coincided with a craze for Italian melody that swept this country in the 1830s, replacing an earlier penchant for Irish and Scottish music. Wagner once remarked in a condescending aside that the Italian opera composers treated the orchestra as if it was one great guitar. As Hamm observes:

The statement is apt; the most expressive and florid passages are usually accompanied by strings, playing softly arpeggiated or strummed chords. A guitar (or a nineteenth-century piano) is a perfectly acceptable substitute.⁵

⁴ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), xvii.

⁵ Hamm, 87.

Rossini's *La Cenerentola* was an absolute sensation when it arrived in New York in 1831 in a popularized English version written by Rophino Lacy under the title *Cinderella: or the Fairy-Queen and the Glass Slipper*. Bellini's *Norma* caused a similar furor ten years later. Every songbook, every method, every catalogue until well after 1870 is filled with songs, arrangements, and variations lifted from such sources: "Cinderella Waltz," "Make Me No Gaudy Chaplet" (taken from Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*), "Gems from *Norma*," "Still So Gently O'er Me Stealing" (from Bellini's *La sonnambula*). Two immensely popular songs from the 1830s, "Katy Darling" and "Little Nell," were based directly on Bellini melodies. Later examples, such as the songs from Balfé's *Bohemian Girl* ("I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls," "Then You'll Remember Me") or Wagner's "Evening Star," could be cited endlessly.

While based on art music, such fare is not art music in itself. Rather it is a popular style based upon a classical prototype. Although some original classic guitar music was regularly available from Europe, Americans generally evolved their own special repertoire based on the same prototypes, much of it decidedly sentimental and overlaid with a peculiarly American layer of nostalgia for past ways of life. Of the 726 solos listed in the Board of Music Trade Catalogue in 1870, only twenty-seven are by identifiable Europeans, of whom Carcassi (with seventeen entries) and Sor (with seven) are predominant. America's taste for nostalgic music may reflect the unconscious longing felt by newly arrived immigrants for a Europe left behind; or perhaps it can be explained by the fact that the young country had yet to acquire a musical style of its own.

The attempt to associate the guitar with folk music is perhaps even more pervasive because it has become so ingrained into our mythology in recent years. The one standard guitar history to include a chapter on "The Guitar in America" is Frederic Grunfeld's *The Art and Times of the Guitar*.⁶ While passing mention is made of such nineteenth-century American salon guitarists as Bateman, de Janon, Foden, and "Dorb" (by whom he means Charles Dorn), the chapter stresses the guitars of the cowboy and the blues singer. This is unfortunate, as it tends to make us forget that the guitar was a very late arrival to the world of folk music.

Although the guitar has, indeed, become the folk instrument *par excellence* of American music, such was not the case in the nineteenth century. At that time the predominant folk instrument among Whites was the fiddle, valued for its versatility and portability; among Blacks, the banjo, the object of endless minstrel show parodies. The songs Cecil Sharp heard in the Appalachians in 1916 were still being sung without accompaniment. The guitar was certainly played in the *hacienda* society of the Mexican Southwest, but the singing cowboy with his guitar is mainly a fantasy from Gene Autry movies. Can one really see a place for temperamental gut strings in such hostile environments as the mountains and deserts of America?

Steel strings were needed before the guitar could become a true folk instrument. No one is quite sure when steel strings became the established norm. One can

6 Frederic V. Grunfeld, *The Art and Times of the Guitar: An Illustrated History of Guitars and Guitarists* (London: Macmillan, 1969), chapter 8.

speculate that they entered the United States from south of the border, perhaps as a legacy of the Mexican War (1846). In any event, they are not well documented until the last decade of the century. The earliest reference to them I have found appears in Charles Henlein's *Complete Modern School for the Guitar* (1888), where Henlein warns against their use: "The fine steel strings in place of the gut, I find objectionable to good and artistic playing."

According to Tom and Mary Ann Evans, Orville Gibson made his first steel-string guitars about 1898; the leading American manufacturer of guitars, C. F. Martin, didn't offer a standard production model with steel strings until 1922.⁷

In my opinion, the place of the guitar in nineteenth-century American life was not among the itinerant workers or the rural poor, nor was it an instrument of upper-class society. Rather the guitar was to be found within the middle class, particularly among those who could not yet afford a piano (the true symbol of Victorian propriety), or who were just beyond the pioneer stage and not yet settled enough to make one practical. If one observes the dedicatees of guitar pieces (more often than not young ladies), one will note a perceivable trend. Before the Civil War such music tends to be dedicated to people living along the Eastern Seaboard in such places as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Later, the focus shifts west to a population living in such states as Ohio, Iowa, and Missouri.

It is my contention that this latter group, upon becoming settled, finally discarded their guitars in favor of pianos (or more likely player pianos or parlor organs) by the turn of the century. These guitars were in turn picked up by rural Black musicians as being preferable to the homemade instruments they had been playing. The special techniques developed by these players after 1900 (bottle-necking, for example) suggest that they were using steel, rather than gut, strings—strings that may first have been appropriated from the traditional banjo or perhaps from Hispanic influences. It was this ingenious group of Black musicians that so fascinated the rural Whites in the 1910s and 1920s and led to country music as we know it today. Time after time these early "hillbilly" performers (Frank Hutchison, Charlie Poole, et al.) comment that they were drawn to the guitar from hearing Black musicians perform.

Early American guitar methods reflected the popular tastes of their day. They were directed towards amateurs and basically set out to accomplish two things: to give the player enough technique to play simple arrangements of popular melodies of the day (a group of these will usually be found at the end of the volume) and to accompany songs. There is nothing elitist about any of these books. The preface to James Flint's *The Guitar at Home* (1857) starts off boldly with the statement, "The Guitar at Home has been compiled as a *book for the people*" (Flint's emphasis).

The guitar had become a popular instrument on the East Coast by the late 1820s. The early teachers were not specialists, but musicians who made their livings

⁷ Tom Evans and Mary Anne Evans, *Guitars from the Renaissance to Rock* (New York & London: Paddington Press, 1977), 220–23. See also Mike Longworth, *Martin Guitars: A History* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Colonial Press, 1975), 25.

principally in the various theater orchestras of the larger cities and added to their incomes by teaching privately. An anonymous “German Musician,” writing home to the magazine *The Caecilia* about New York musical life remarks in a letter dated July 27, 1828:

In a pecuniary point of view, music is a lucrative business for men who in addition to their regular engagements can give lessons on the piano or guitar. Such persons can save up a small fortune in a short time, but only on these two instruments; nobody finds time for any others. Good teachers get one thaler (75 cents) a lesson, others get 18 thalers (\$13.50) for 24 lessons.⁸

In a review of James Ballard’s *Elements of Guitar-Playing* (1838), the *New York Mirror* had this to say about the place of the guitar in American society:

The guitar is now becoming every day a greater favorite as its capabilities are better known, especially among the ladies, who esteem it for the elegance of its form and facilities it affords for accompanying the voice in song. . . . We are glad to see the guitar becoming better appreciated, for we look upon the instrument as one of the best means of defusing through the whole mass of our variously-constituted population the softening and elevating influences of music.

And this from the *New York News*:

[The guitar] possesses many desirable qualifications as an accompaniment to amateurs, as on no other instrument can so much music be produced with so little of the drudgery of practice. Commend us to the guitar for the enlivening of the family circle!

The enlivening of the family circle — this is what guitar instruction was all about in the nineteenth century.

Many nineteenth-century references to the guitar in this country sound extremely naive to modern ears, but they are not without a certain period charm of their own, including one of the earliest, which appeared in the program bill of a concert held at the City Tavern in Philadelphia on March 6, 1787:

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.⁹

⁸ English translation in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 3 (1853), 38.

⁹ O. G. Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life in America, 1731–1800* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907), 130.

A correspondent to Dwight's *Journal of Music*, commenting on the San Francisco music scene, reports in the May 3, 1856, issue of that influential magazine on an unnamed guitarist whom I take to be Manuel Ferrer:

One thing I must not forget to mention. We have here a musical prodigy, a native Californian guitarist, who executes wonders, having all the facility that Ole Bull has on the violin, and performs the "Carnival of Venice" with quite as much effect. Four years ago he had never seen a guitar. He reads music with considerable facility, but is able to play melodies and harmonies, after hearing them performed by an orchestra, accurately.

George Derwort, a New York guitar teacher, placed a number of ads in local papers during 1845 with the following announcement:

G. H. Derwort, professor of singing, guitar, and pianoforte, has opened a class for Young Ladies, from 7 to 10 years of age, among whom are three of his own daughters, whom he proposes to instruct thoroughly in the art of Singing . . . His method cannot fail to impart to his pupil a clear perception and a thorough knowledge of the grammatical principles of music with the ability to harmonize any simple given melody. Terms \$20 per annum, payable quarterly in advance. Lessons three times per week.

Otto Torp's *New and Improved Method for the Spanish Guitar* (1834, earlier edition in 1828) was typical of the American methods of its day. Beginning with simple scale studies and arpeggio exercises in C major, the book leads the student through such melodies as "Araby's Daughter," "Weber's Last Waltz," "Pieces from Cinderella" (after Donizetti), and "My Heart and Lute." The work concludes with "a Collection of Airs from Favorite Operas with German, Italian, French and English Words," including "The Last Rose of Summer," the Barcarolle from Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* and "Gaily the Troubadour." The pieces are mainly short binary forms (usually a mere sixteen measures). Only the more usual keys are covered, and little use is made of the upper positions. Open basses are utilized as often as possible. The one nod to the European guitar masters is the inclusion of Ferdinand Carrulli's [sic] "Celebrated Exercise to shew the different positions on the Instrument."

The third edition of Ballard's *Elements of Guitar-Playing* appeared four years later and is noteworthy for its attention to European models, which was highly unusual at the time. Even the versions of Carcassi's famous method, which became available about the same time, were watered down and adapted to American tastes. As I pointed out in a recent article on this method, Ballard based his text on Sor's *Method* and advocated an unusual "position system for teaching harmony."¹⁰ Even though he

¹⁰ "A Noteworthy Early-American Guitar Treatise: James Ballard's *Elements* of 1838," *Soundboard* 8, no. 4 (November 1981): 270–76; reprinted with minor revisions in *Soundboard Scholar*, no. 7 (2021), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/sbs/vol7/iss1/9>.

includes a number of pieces by Sor, Aguado, and other European masters, the fact remains that the music primarily falls within the mainstream of popular American musical taste. Included are simple arrangements of such pieces as “O dolce concerto” [contento] (lifted from Mozart), “Oft in the Stilly Night,” “Love’s Ritornella,” and “What Fairy-like Music.” Also included is the earliest version I have found of that hardy American perennial “The Spanish Fandango,” a piece in open tuning that lives on in the folk recordings of Elizabeth Cotten and Norman Blake (who was taught it by his grandmother). Popular music can, indeed, become folk music if it becomes widespread enough to enter aural tradition.¹¹

The most striking feature of such later methods as N. P. B. Curtiss’s *Progressive and Complete Method for the Guitar* (1850, but still in print in 1878), Septimus Winner’s *Easy System for the Guitar* (1866), and Antonio Lopes’s *Instruction for the Guitar* (1884) is their conservatism.¹² While the mainstream of popular music moved away from the simple strophic and binary forms in favor of the verse/chorus format and began to experiment with a richer harmonic palette (partly the result of Wagner’s tremendous influence at the time), the music found in these tutors tends to be the same old repertoire carried over from the 1830s. The “New and Improved Edition” of the Curtiss method (1878), for instance, includes the same mixture of pieces (“Weber’s Last Waltz,” “March from Norma,” “Oft in the Stilly Night”) as those found in the methods of Torp and Ballard. It is as if the repertoire had become frozen in time.

The one high spot in American guitar instruction during this period will be found in the two methods written by Justin Holland (1874 and 1876), works by a Black man who had completely assimilated the tastes of a White, middle-class audience. The later of these, Holland’s *Modern Method for the Guitar*, compares favorably with the best methods then available in Europe and is one of the few attempts to raise the guitar to the level of an art instrument. As Holland notes in his preface, “The common-place and trivial compositions of the day have been entirely ignored, as being unsuitable for the promotion of either skill or taste.” The book appears to be modeled on Carcassi (with each key being introduced with a scale, cadence, exercise, and prelude), but the text is much more detailed and the student is led through a wider range of material at a more leisurely pace. The work concludes with a list of pieces Holland feels to be suitable repertory. All the pieces mentioned are European and include works by Carcassi, Giuliani, de Fossa, and Mertz.

On the whole, however, the guitar remained a modest appointment of the boudoir, even though it actually seems to have grown in popularity during the 1880s. While it had long been played in the home, Sigmund Spaeth’s *History of Popular Music in America* (1948) specifically mentions it as being one of the “social graces” of the era:

11 Certain songs of Stephen Foster, for example, are considered just that by many people. A number of Foster’s songs appeared in guitar versions during the 1850s, some of which may have been prepared by the composer himself, since Foster is known to have played the guitar.

12 Antonio Lopes, *Instruction for the Guitar*, 1884, facsimile ed., ed. Stanley Buetens, with a new foreword by Peter Danner (Menlo Park, California: Instrumenta Antigua Publications, 1983).

On the side of the social graces, the eighties developed the practice of the mandolin, banjo, and guitar in the American home, the appearance of the bicycle in the streets, the founding of the United States Lawn Tennis Association and the original *Life* magazine (comic, not pictorial).¹³

All of these, we might note, are solid, middle-class recreations. The guitar music played by these people was solidly middle-class as well, judging from the surviving music. Most of the pieces published at this time would have been judged by Holland as among “the common-place and trivial,” but it might be pointed out that Holland himself published many such arrangements.

In his *Book of Musical Americana*, Deac Martin, a one-time leading spokesman of barbershop quartet singing, gives a vivid account of his introduction to the guitar while growing up in a small rural community in Missouri at the turn of the century:

Around 1902 . . . my older brother returned from the gold diggings of Cripple Creek, Colorado, with a mandolin. Then he ordered a Harwood guitar from Jenkins in Kansas City. In the mail-order book of *Arrangements for Mandolin and Guitar* (50 cents), I was introduced to foreign-looking names such as Mascagni, Chaminade, Czibulka, Verdi, De Koven and Schumann. The introductions led to some fraternization, but only after discouraging struggles to relate the strings and frets with the little black dots and symbols in the book. My brother was determined to . . . bend the twig. Sullenly, I learned “Stephanie Gavotte,” selections from “Martha,” “La Czarina,” “Evening Star,” Mendelssohn’s “Spring Sng,” and other standards. He also taught me to tinkle the “Spanish Fandango” and to pluck four chords in C on the guitar. They were adequate, according to local standards, when applied to “Bedalia,” “In a Cozy Corner,” “Goodbye Dolly Grey,” and “Ain’t Dat a Shame.”¹⁴

This domestic scene must have been played out in countless American homes during the century. As mail-order houses became an established way of life, the guitar was introduced into homes that had not previously known the charms of a musical instrument. This may help explain the guitar’s rise in popularity in the Midwest towards the end of the century and Aaron Shearer’s report of a sudden rash of superficial methods about the same time.¹⁵ However, by 1902 (the period about which Martin was writing) the guitar had ceased to be a part of the musical mainstream in most American parlors. Continuity was maintained by small groups of aficionados (guided by such enthusiasts as Vahdah Olcott-Bickford and Walter Jacobs), but the door had closed on a tradition.

In W. L. Hubbard’s *History of American Music*, published in 1908, we read:

- 13 Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America* (New York: Random House, 1948), 212. Spaeth’s reference to *Life* is an allusion to a long-forgotten comic magazine that once attempted to emulate England’s famous *Punch*.
- 14 C. T. Martin, *Deac Martin’s Book of Musical Americana* (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 29–30.
- 15 Aaron Shearer, “A Review of Early Methods,” *Guitar Review*, no. 23 (1959): 26.

The census of 1900 reported the manufacture in the United States of 78,389 mandolins and mandolas, 78,494 guitars, and 18,521 banjos. Dealers at the present time say that the trade in small instruments of this class has been virtually killed off by the automatic musical instruments.¹⁶

This trend would be reversed by the rise of the steel-string guitar and by the coming of Segovia, but these are other stories . . .



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¹⁶ W.L. Hubbard, *History of American Music*, vol. 4 of *The American History and Encyclopedia of Music* (Toledo, OH: Irving Squire, 1908), 334.

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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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