

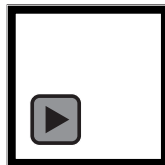
The BobCasts



The Guitar and the Art of the Transcription

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *The Guitar and the Art of the Transcription*.

Let us establish something up front, something that requires us to listen to the opening 53 seconds (or so!) of the Prelude No. 5 in D Major for guitar by the great Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959).



Villa Lobos Prelude No. 5 in D Major for solo guitar

Having heard that, I've got a question: is there anyone out there that *doesn't* like the sound of a Classical guitar (meaning an acoustic Spanish guitar with nylon strings)? Go ahead; raise your hand. Anyone?

Good, because anyone who *had* raised his or her hand was going to be removed from this BobCast and forced to listen to the Russian Navy Piccolo Ensemble play "favorite thrash hits" for three agonizing hours; that'll teach you not to like the gorgeously intimate sound of the Classical/Spanish guitar!

The evolution of the Classical/Spanish guitar (in Spain; big surprise) is nearly as complex an issue as human evolution; I kid you not. So for now, suffice it the following.

The guitar—or more accurately, what today we identify as guitar-like instruments with various numbers of strings and characteristics—had come to be considered the "Spanish national instrument" by the sixteenth century: the 1500s. (Excuse me, but how lucky are the Spanish to have something as exquisite as the guitar as their "national instrument"? What, pray tell, could be considered to be the American "national instrument"? A TV remote? A Vitamix blender? A Twitter feed?)

"The earliest surviving, unaltered Classical/Spanish guitar as we presently understand it—that is a fretted, six-string instrument shaped like Sophia Loren in her prime—was constructed in 1791 in Naples (at a time when Naples was ruled by Spain). The *modern*, standard Spanish guitar (as

we will now refer to it) didn't come into existence until the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, at roughly the same time as the modern grand piano.

As we might expect from an instrument long associated with Spanish folk culture, the guitar had long been associated with Spanish folk music of all sorts. But until the six-string guitar became standard in the late eighteenth century, the instrument had not been blessed with much composed repertoire. That began to change thanks to the guitarist, composer, and pedant Fernando Sor, who was born in Barcelona in 1778 and died in Paris in 1839. Such was Sor's virtuosity that the hugely influential Belgian music critic François-Joseph Fétis referred to Sor as "the Beethoven of the guitar" while referring to Beethoven as "the Sor of the piano", appraisals that likely pleased neither Sor nor Beethoven.

Sor's works for the guitar remain the bedrock of the repertoire of music composed for the guitar, a foundational repertoire that was built on by the guitarist and composer Francisco Tárrega, who was born in Villarreal, Spain in 1852 and died in Barcelona in 1909. Referred to variously as "the father of the Spanish guitar" and "the Chopin of the guitar", Tárrega attended and then taught at the Madrid Conservatory of Music, influencing generations of student guitarists.

In mentioning Fernando Sor and Francisco Tárrega, we have identified the only major composers of nineteenth century guitar music (yes, Niccolò Paganini and Hector Berlioz both wrote for the guitar but, frankly, nothing of great significance). During the same period, the piano—which as we've observed came into its modern form in the nineteenth century as well—was blessed with a gigantic repertoire by a who's-who of great composers: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schuman, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Debussy, to name a *few*. Putting aside the fact that all these dudes were pianists, we are still honor-bound to ask ourselves why they didn't compose anything for the guitar, an instrument that was almost as common in nineteenth century middle class salons as the piano? I mean, at some time or another, they all wrote for the violin, the cello, the horn, and so forth: so why not the guitar?

The answer: composing for the guitar is fiendishly difficult. The odd arrangement of the six strings—in ascending order, bottom-to-top E-A-D-G-B-E—assures that stuff that would seem to be routine for a non-guitarist can be defacto impossible to play in reality; and stuff that would seem to be impossible to play to a non-guitarist can be, in reality, child's play for a guitarist.

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT! The idiosyncrasies of the instrument being what they are, the only people who really and truly understand the guitar are guitarists themselves!

(On this you can trust me. In 1996 I wrote a solo guitar piece for the brilliant David Tanenbaum, a friend and then-colleague on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory. I would share a bit of the program note I wrote for the piece and, by doing so, I trust I will be forgiven the unbearable conceit of quoting myself.

"A number of years ago, the great English guitarist Julian Bream told David Tanenbaum - the dedicatee of tonight's premiere—not to premiere a guitar work unless he knew for a fact it was the composer's second guitar work. Sage advice. The guitar is an instrument that gives up its secrets to a non-guitar playing composer only reluctantly. Indeed, the timbral, digital and chordal subtleties of this most subtle and intimate of instruments are truly understood by the guitarist only. Pity the outlander who composes for the guitar for the first time!

“With this last thought in mind I had, until last fall, managed to avoid writing for the guitar. However, even the most abject compositional coward will relent when a musician like David Tanenbaum asks for a piece and offers his assistance and critical judgment in its composition. So it was with *PLUCK*, composed between November of 1995 and January of 1996. Bream’s advice notwithstanding, *PLUCK* is my first guitar piece. Tanenbaum is brave.

“The title, *PLUCK*, thus refers to both the action of plucking strings as well as Tanenbaum’s “pluck” - his bravery and true grit in the face of guitaristic naiveté.”

(You are correct; there is no such word as “guitaristic”.)

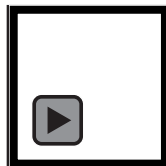
Because of the difficulty in writing idiomatically for the instrument, to the greatest extent it has been left up to guitarists themselves to provide a repertoire for their instrument. As such, the vast majority of composers featured on this season’s guitar programs are themselves guitarists: Heitor Pereira (born 1960), Yuquijiro Yocoh (1925-2009), Mathias Duplessy (born 1972), Sébastien Vachez (born 1973), Carlo Domeniconi (born 1947), Dušan Bogdanović (born 1955), Sérgio Assad (born 1952), Augustin Barios (1885-1944), and Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959).

But for guitarists, providing a repertoire for their instruments is not just a matter of composing for the guitar but also arranging and transcribing non-guitar music for the guitar.

Although the words “arrangement” and “transcription” are often used interchangeably, we’re going to make an important distinction between them.

A “transcription” is the adaptation of a piece of music written for one instrument (or set of instruments) to another instrument (or set of instruments). Such transcriptions are the repertorial bread and butter of the modern concert guitarist. For example, Johann Sebastian Bach composed not a single work for the guitar. But for the modern guitarist that make no difference whatsoever, because Bach’s works for lute, solo cello, solo violin, and harpsichord have, over the years, been transcribed many times for solo guitar by many guitarists.

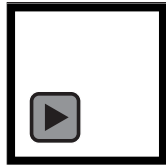
A “transcription” seeks to capture the spirit and substance of the original composition as *exactly as possible*. As an example, let’s hear a bit of a transcription of the prelude from Bach’s Partita No. 3 in E Major for violin solo, played by Kazuhito Yamashita:



Bach’s Partita No. 3 in E Major, prelude, transcribed for guitar, Kazuhito Yamashita

That was a *transcription*.

As opposed to an “arrangement”, which will often take all sorts of liberties with the original piece of music. This is particularly true of arrangements of jazz, rock, pop, or folk music. For example, the following “arrangement” of the traditional Spanish folk tune *Sevillanas*, arranged for four guitars by Celedonia Romero:



Sevillanas, the Romeros

Composing, transcribing *and* arranging: I know of no other instrument that makes so many extracurricular demands on its players than does the guitar! And we will hear examples of all of this—works *composed* for the guitar, *transcribed* for the guitar, and *arranged* for the guitar—in San Francisco Performances' upcoming season.

Thank you.