

The Cambridge Companion to the
GUITAR

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EDITED BY

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1 Picking through cultures: a guitarist's music history

VICTOR ANAND COELHO

Prelude: finding the guitar in history

The history of the modern guitar begins in the culture of late medieval Europe, where we find the first unequivocal evidence of the characteristic figure-eight-shaped instrument in court documents, images, and poetry of the fifteenth century.¹ By the Renaissance, the guitar had developed a sizable and idiomatic repertory written in tablature and it became standardized enough in construction, tuning, and technique to permit an explosive realization of its potential in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Italy, Spain, and France. By the nineteenth century, the guitar thrived in salon culture and on the concert stage, producing dazzling virtuosos and laying the foundations for what is now largely accepted as the guitar's core "classical" repertoire.

From this point on the instrument's development becomes much less indebted to its classical past. In fact, its role in Western art-music over some 600 years is but one small chapter of a much larger story concerning the enormous global impact the instrument has had since 1900. By contrast with the piano, whose developments in structure and repertoire were conditioned almost exclusively by the art-music tradition until the early twentieth century, the guitar's development is made up of *multiple* and overlapping histories. To put it another way, guitar history simultaneously spans popular and classical styles, urban and rural techniques, contemporary and historical practices, written and unwritten traditions, and Western and non-Western cultures, revealing the contributions of both formally and *un*-formally trained players.

The enormous cultural and stylistic breadth of this tradition has not made it easy for music history to digest. Consequently, because music histories have been written in a library rather than on the street, the contributions of the guitar have been relegated to little more than a few lines, a picture, and a footnote. This undervaluing, within the classical tradition, of possibly the most widely played instrument in the world is the result of several factors. Prior to the eighteenth century, guitar music was written in tablature, an immensely practical type of notation but one that continues to obscure the repertory from most non-players – the irony being that tablature was originally intended, and still is, to render guitar music more accessible.

[3]



Plate 1 French 10-franc note issued c. 1964 of composer Hector Berlioz with a guitar

Another reason has to do with the emphasis that historians have placed on the contributions of “great” composers – that is, those whose works can be arranged as links in a long chain of influence, from the Renaissance to Stravinsky, which effectively pushed guitar composers, even those baroque guitarists who were central figures during their time, to the periphery of musical developments. (One exception to this can be seen in Plate 1, in which composer Hector Berlioz was featured on a 10-franc note with his main instrument, the guitar, rather than a symbol of the orchestral works that made him famous.) Then, there is the artistic concept of musical “evolution” and compositional “worth,” in which works achieve their standing and posterity through validation by musical analysis. Through this model, which has had enormous influence in the establishment of “masterpieces,” the guitar works of De Visée, Gueráu, and Sor, for example, are “quantifiably” rendered “inferior” to the works of their respective contemporaries, Lully, Bach, and Schubert. Finally, and most importantly in my opinion, musicology’s apprehension (until recently) to engage in the study of popular cultures (or even *culture*) has been chiefly responsible for ignoring the guitar’s role within music history, even in studies of the Iberian peninsula.

Paradoxically, the unnotated, oral guitar traditions – rock, blues, world music, ethnopop, and flamenco, to name a few – have fared much better and offer the clearest map for the positioning of a guitar history. Recent popular music studies have rightly acknowledged the contributions of the guitar, with research into rock guitar, for example, now established as a bona fide academic industry on the heels of Robert Walser’s and Steve Waksman’s pioneering studies.² Similarly, many of the guitar styles active within the popular music of Europe, Africa, Indonesia, and Latin America have been

studied for years by ethnomusicologists, focusing not only on style, but on their impact on culture. In other words, as much if not more has been written about guitar music that was *never* written down, rather than the other way around, a point I will return to that raises important issues about how our histories might be written.

Seen in this light, Frederic Grunfeld's *The Art and Times of the Guitar* (London, 1969) remains an admirable and durable work. Despite his denunciation of the electric guitar, which now appears outdated – Grunfeld does not even consider the instrument as a “guitar” – he was correct in his implicit understanding that the story of the guitar must be narrated by both history *and* its contemporary players; that the guitar's unique history is, in fact, the reconciliation between its past and present.

With this opening essay, I would like to continue along these lines by marking off the common ground that exists between guitar history and the modern player. Without trying to construct, reconstruct, validate, or revise the history of the guitar, I will approach the topic mainly from the standpoint of today's player of popular music, through whom history interacts with contemporary practice. Most guitarists, professional and amateur, would never see themselves as historians. Yet they are more concerned with the history of their instrument and with notions of authenticity than a piano major at a college or conservatory for whom music history is a required part of the curriculum. In fact, other than early music performers, the most historically minded players are not even the classical guitarists, who have shown only mild interest in historical practice, but the rock, jazz, country, and especially blues players, who are reverential in their respect for the older generations of players but thoroughly pragmatic as performers themselves. So although guitarists have rarely been offered speaking roles in any staging of music history, contemporary players reveal a systematic and critical engagement with historical sources, theory, and practice, whether they are pushing the technological boundaries of effects and digitalization, or dedicating themselves to historical performance and lutherie. Thus, the following discussion will focus on what guitar history has to offer and what common ground exists across guitar cultures.

The guitar across cultures

Despite the consistency in the guitar's basic shape and tuning over the past four centuries, it has accommodated more diverse players, techniques, and styles than any other instrument in use today. The guitar's universal presence in the world today testifies to its long history of crossing (and even bridging) cultures. It reminds us that the popularity of the guitar since 1900, even in the “classical” worlds, is largely indebted to the widespread dissemination



Plate 2 Keith Richards, 1999, Oklahoma City (photo courtesy of Guido Karp)

of popular music – with which the guitar is virtually synonymous – and the global seeding of guitar cultures through human migration, colonialism, post-colonialism, technology, and revival.

Even if the guitar holds a Spanish passport, it has naturalized itself uniquely throughout the world, across cultures and demographics, embedding itself simultaneously into folk, popular, and classical traditions. The classical guitar is Spanish; but the electric guitars and Dreadnought are unequivocally American; the many Latin variants of the guitar can be considered indigenous; and guitar makers throughout the world have personalized their instruments to such an extent that their guitars achieve nationalistic autonomy. This cross-cultural migration and naturalization of the instrument is a process that began in the sixteenth century, and continues to have far-reaching implications on current guitar styles and techniques. Moreover, the guitar has acted as an important conduit for the transmission of culture and ideology. If we agree with Keith Richards (see Plate 2) – and it is plausible to me – that it was the invisible but steady, subversive work of rock and roll, not politicians, that finally brought down the Berlin Wall, then the guitar figures more prominently in this landmark moment in history than Reagan's famous admonition to Gorbachev.

Guitar cultures thrive in many parts of the world, in the Caribbean, South America, Africa, Indonesia – in short, along the paths, mainly, of colonialist expansion. We will bypass the irresolvable question of the instrument's origins – whether it originates in central Asia or the Arab world – since

there is just as much evidence to suggest that the guitar is European in origin. Whatever the case may be, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the guitar was cultivated in Spain, Italy, and France, mainly as a four-course *chitarrino* and five-course *chitarra*. By the sixteenth century, the Portuguese spice route and missionary expansion brought the vihuela to Asia; Francis Xavier brought along bowed vihuelas and clavichords as gifts on his missionary travels, and the “bihuela” is listed as a domestic instrument in archival documents in Goa, India and represented in early seventeenth-century paintings both in Goa and in Japan.³ Unfortunately, we possess no information about its repertory in Asia; but we do know that native youths attending the Jesuit College of St. Paul in Goa played Portuguese “chacotas” on the guitar even during church services, causing a minor scandal and prompting reprimands by the Jesuit elders.⁴ (Missionaries had introduced the guitar to assist in their evangelical activities as well as to eradicate indigenous instruments, musical styles, and idols.) Other guitar cultures, such as those that developed in western Africa, within the *kroncong* tradition of Indonesia, and, of course, in Brazil, were also seeded by the Portuguese.

The guitar (and vihuela) come to the New World during the sixteenth century. Of the three original vihuelas that are extant, one is from Quito, Ecuador, and has been dated by specialists to the beginning of the seventeenth century, suggesting the kind of instrument that might be associated with the vihuelas mentioned in India and elsewhere. The cultural doors of the guitar swing the other way as well: the guitar is the host for New World styles like the *sarabanda* that were carried back to Europe and were cultivated by European guitarists long before they were standardized as courtly Baroque ballet, at which point the works were blanched of the “ethnicity” that the guitarists had been able to preserve of the dances’ origins. By the 1720s, one of the leading guitarists in Spain, Santiago de Murcia, makes an historic trip to Mexico where he leaves a fascinating trail of musical sources. Much of the repertory contained in these New World manuscripts is typically Spanish, but some pieces, of “rambunctious vitality,”⁵ are clearly derived from his exposure to indigenous music in his new, New World home. The cultural openness demonstrated by Murcia – a highly regarded court musician who was once the guitarist of the Queen of Spain – in adopting music of Afro-Mexican origins is in stark contrast to the religious and military arm of most colonists, whether in Asia or the New World, who expressed little to no interest in native art forms aside from their value in trade. Despite the Euro-imperialism of his age, Murcia emerges as a spokesman for and an early example of the “inclusive” musical personality that remains a characteristic more of guitarists than of practically any other contemporary instrumentalist.

A case study in guitar migrations: the blues guitar

This short sketch of the guitar's early itineraries demonstrates the extent to which the instrument is associated with large-scale migration, exploration, and colonization. The ramifications of these travels continue to be felt in the succeeding centuries, and they are crucial to the development of popular music. Throughout the twentieth century, guitarists in the areas of jazz, blues, pop, folk, and country have assimilated, modified, and personalized styles of astonishing cultural diversity, partly because they are (blissfully) ignorant of the classical hierarchies – promoted more, to be honest, by performers like Segovia than by musicologists – that constructed an “impenetrable” firewall around the Western art tradition.

The blues guitar offers a fascinating example of cross- and even *crisscross*-cultural exchange, highlighting Mississippi as a crucial nexus for guitar cultures. As is generally known, the history of the blues guitar as it evolved out of the Delta in the early twentieth century is indebted to distant traditions of west African instruments and styles, which were combined with the underpinnings of Western harmony. At the same time, from deep in the Pacific, the Hawaiian slack-key tradition provided the same Delta blues players with a repertory of open tunings that had a formative influence on their guitar technique and compositions. Country, hillbilly, vaudeville, Spanish, and even cowboy guitar styles were soon added to the mix. By the end of the 1940s blues musicians had largely migrated north to cities like Chicago, where the electric guitar was firmly established as the blues guitarist's instrument of choice. The increased availability of blues and R&B records issued by major companies like Imperial and Chess, found a hugely receptive, eager, and most of all *white* audience on the other side of the Atlantic, especially in England. The resulting English blues revival in the hands of devotees such as John Mayall, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and others proved to be seminal in the development of a central rock language in the 1960s and 1970s. It provided an “authenticity” to rock and legitimized it as a musical style with a profound and engaging historical past, rather than as a music that was crude, unimaginative, and hastily manufactured, as many critics then claimed. (One of the many stories about the Beatles' “Nowhere Man” is that it is about one of their earliest critics, a musicologist who wrote for one of the London dailies.) Many of the vocal inflections from the old blues masters are instantly recognizable in the rock generation's mimicry of singers Jimmy Reed (listen to the Stones' “Spider and the Fly,” for example), Howlin' Wolf, and Muddy Waters. But it is safe to say that the most influential borrowings – the “core” of the revival – were taken from the guitarists, including Muddy Waters, Elmore James, T-Bone Walker, Buddy Guy, and R&B players Matt Murphy and Albert King. They exerted a deep

and lasting influence on young guitarists like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards and Brian Jones, and the incomparable Jimi Hendrix.

Africa to Mississippi to Chicago to London: the guitar's role within a single genre, blues, reveals a migration that cuts across widely diverse cultures and peoples; Third World to G-8; African to Afro-American to European; colonized to colonizer; poor to rich. It is a history that runs fully contrary to the patterns of transmission that shape Western music history. In the latter, courtly cultures and economically privileged classes are the primary patrons and first consumers of music. Only later, through the democratization of print culture and technology, and for the profit to the publisher (and sometimes artist), does the music reach a wider audience.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the blues migration we have just described, guitar in tow, veers off into two new post-colonial directions. The first leads us back to America, where the English blues revival in the guise of the Rolling Stones, The Animals and, later, blues-based bands like Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin, returns a harder, virtuosic version of the blues that was first exported to them a decade earlier. The second path leads us further back to Africa, where a number of thriving guitar cultures begin to incorporate American blues, R&B, soul, funk, and reggae, along with indigenous elements and occasionally French lyrics. An exploding popular music scene in Africa during this time resulted in several important electric guitar traditions flourishing in central Africa, particularly in the Congo. By the late 1960s, a traditional predisposition toward Cuban music gave way to American influences, thus completing a unique and important cultural circle.

The influence of rock

If the role of the guitar prior to the twentieth century has been ignored by music histories, it would be difficult to over-emphasize its importance in music from the 1950s on. Although purists might disagree (on emotional rather than realistic grounds), it is really impossible to deny that it is the enormous, unstoppable influence of rock that has made the guitar perhaps the most widely played instrument in the world. Here, one must distinguish between rock music itself and its influence. As music, rock is both worthy of study and easily dismissed. It has deep roots in American genres like country, blues, R&B, and rockabilly, all of which were already skillfully amalgamated by rock guitarists of the 1950s, such as Elvis's great sideman, Scotty Moore. Indeed, rock is essentially guitar-driven, and the best players employ the latest technological advances in effects, recording, and instruments while maintaining a strong interest in authenticity through sustaining old styles

and techniques. They often use vintage equipment as well in order to preserve “that sound,” inspiring Fender’s decision a few years ago to reissue its famous 1959 Bassman amplifier – “The most legendary amplifier ever built by any company” according to the instruction manual. At its best, rock can be complex, virtuosic, layered with styles ranging from Indian classical music to techno, and unrestricted by *a priori* rules of form and harmony. It is unnotated; but a clear notion of “composition” emerges through the various stages of the often complex and lengthy recording process. In short, rock music offers much to study, and this is why it now holds its own in academic circles.

The trajectory of rock’s influence, however, reaches far beyond its music, impacting on practically all other styles, including jazz, country, folk, and classical. It is ironic that while Segovia denounced rock, the overwhelming profile of the modern classical guitar student at college or conservatory is one who began as a rocker. In fact, it is difficult to see how the classical guitar could have maintained its presence without the many rock-trained students who began flocking to guitar programs since the middle 1970s, successfully transferring some aspects of their self-taught rock training (particularly left-hand technique) to classical guitar. Similarly, the greatest influx of new jazz players also occurred during the 1970s when rock guitarists poured into jazz (including established players like Jeff Beck and Carlos Santana), inspired by fusion groups like John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra and Chick Corea’s Return to Forever which combined modern jazz styles and modes with rock rhythms, virtuoso playing, and volume.

Rock and its pedagogy

Why, and how, can rock be so influential on so many different styles? One answer lies in the well-kept secret that rock guitar offers one of the most successful, though unrecognized, pedagogical programs for learning music. Using the basic principle that playing one’s favorite tunes, however simple, can unlock innate musical expression, rock guitar has introduced music to many students with absolutely no prior musical experience. They are never as musically “rounded” as the pianists or string players, but many music majors in classical guitar and composition began precisely in this manner. Even if guitarists do not “graduate” from rock to classical or jazz, the stylistic breadth of rock is so wide that guitarists are challenged by the many diverse styles and traditions within the genre itself, such as classical music, world music, a variety of fusion styles, bluegrass, folk, and country.

Finally, rock today is no longer an exclusively oral tradition. Guitar playing and learning have been transformed by the many tablature transcriptions

of solos, lessons, pieces, and entire repertoires that are published in editions and in magazines like *Guitar Player*. Consequently, rock playing is moving ever closer to a text-based, or score, tradition. While the majority of players still learn by ear and through observing other guitarists, the increase in the use of tablature scores reveals a closer alignment with classical methods, coupled with a more standardized process of learning. The difficulty in telling guitar players apart these days is already an indication that rock guitar pedagogy has become more organized, more systematic, and more efficient. It is only a matter of time before rock guitar is accepted as a soloistic “classical” tradition, taking its rightful place next to the violin, cello, and classical guitar.

Postlude: classicizing rock guitar

That this trend is already underway is revealed by the Kronos Quartet's now-famous 1985 recording of Jimi Hendrix's “Purple Haze.” They transform Hendrix's signature piece into a scored composition for string quartet, and effectively move one of the most famous rock guitar anthems from the Fillmore East to Carnegie Hall. The arrangement is not in itself unusual; hundreds of works by the Beatles, Elton John, and others have been orchestrated for a variety of string ensembles for ambient easy listening and, occasionally, performance. But the Kronos's version is different in that the members of the quartet seize upon the essence of Hendrix's work: the riff, its attitude, its sound – in short, Hendrix's guitar. When a rock band plays “Purple Haze,” it is called a “cover.” The Kronos's version, however, becomes a “reading,” an “interpretation,” a performance, that the quartet approaches as they would any great work, regardless of its genre. Moreover, in choosing the work for performance, they picked one that had all of the necessary traits for a traditional masterwork: its brilliant composer died tragically young, he was a virtuoso, and in the intervening years the work had been anointed within the rock world as a “classic.”

The peril we are now seeing in the classical music world – orchestras on the brink of financial ruin, the recording industry continuing their massive layoffs and the closure of their classical operations, the thrifty economics of labels selling their back catalogue rather than promoting new artists, the switch, every year, of radio stations from classical programming to popular and chat formats, the failure of orchestras to understand the cultural importance of new music – has been exacerbated by a growing culture that has positioned rock as the new classical music. It now has the infrastructure of any classical cultural institution: famous venues; a history with traceable roots; the existence of a rock élite as well as its younger anarchic adversaries;

a canon of “masterworks” that is often re-interpreted by other artists; a systematic pedagogy and training for young musicians; a strong presence in academic circles; band competitions and festivals; and the availability of transcriptions and “scores.” Even the many franchises of the “Hard Rock Café,” with its memorabilia hanging on the walls and from the ceiling, are rock’s answer to the famous bohemian cafés like Les Deux Magots.

Of particular interest are the recent museum exhibitions featuring the guitar at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (1996) and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (2000), which placed the guitar in a historical context, categorizing instruments by genre, type, vintage, and purpose. The result is a rarefication and connoisseurship; the instruments inhabit the world of *objets d’art*, Les Paul’s famous “Log” or the Fender “Broadcaster” (both from the 1940s) being treated as an early baroque violin. Finally, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame provides the most visible evidence of the cultural institutionalization of rock, in which rock history has been curated and arranged, complete with “masterpieces” in the form of instruments and clothing used by rock musicians. Within this growing cultural and artistic recognition of rock, the guitar is poised to become a symbol of a new classicism.