

## ART CORNER

# Dialogues With the Guitar

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It is nearly 30 years since I first held a guitar in my hands and was immediately captivated by the chords that came from its six strings. We have been inseparable companions ever since, with daily conversations in music: the only truly universal language.

Everyone who plays a musical instrument knows the relationship with it is more than that of a simple means of expression. It has a life of its own, and just as with another person, there are days when this relationship is fluid and almost magical. And these magical moments happen not only when you discover notes you sense are your own in an unknown score, but also when you enter a luthier's workshop and are invaded by the mixed smells of varnish, exotic woods and glue.

Although it is difficult to express in a few words what a guitar encompasses, I will try to sketch out some of the secrets of this instrument, including some interesting aspects like its development from ancient origins, the best composers and guitarists in its history, as well as some curiosities and anecdotes.



Figure 1. Portico of Glory (Santiago de Compostela).

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## History

The origins of the guitar are quite vague, although there is evidence of similar instruments centuries before our time. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *Kithara*, and the instrument is probably a descendent of the ancient Greco-Roman zither. One of the oldest representations of a guitar can be seen on the Pórtico de la Gloria (Portico of Glory) of the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela (Figure 1), where Jesus can be seen surrounded by 24 musicians. The instruments they hold include one shaped like a guitar, which is presumed to represent an early vihuela.

## Grand Masters of the Classical Guitar

The most important figure of the 19th century was undoubtedly the Spaniard, Fernando Sor (1778-1839), and another leading exponent of the period was his compatriot, Dionisio Aguado (famous for a guitar teaching method still in use today). The history of the modern guitar reaches its apogee with Francisco Tárrega (1852-1901). Tárrega made transcriptions for the guitar of music by Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, and Spanish composers like Albéniz, showing the vast possibilities of the instrument. When Albéniz heard his compositions transcribed for the guitar and played by Tárrega, he said they were better than his original versions for the piano. Franz Schubert (1797-1828) composed on a guitar because he was too poor to afford a piano.

During the period when Tárrega was working to develop a more solid technique on the guitar, the luthier Antonio Torres Jurado (1817-1892), was perfecting the structural form of the instrument.

On arriving at the 20th century, homage must be paid to Andrés Segovia (born in 1890) who brought the guitar into the great concert halls around the world. Any list of the great guitarists of the 20th century would be incomplete without Narciso Yepes and Regino Sainz de la Maza, who was the first guitarist to play Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* in 1940. The *Concierto de Aranjuez* for guitar and orchestra is the best-selling classical recording of the

20th century. Andrés Segovia also paved the way for other great guitarists like John Williams in Britain. The repertoire of the 20th century has introduced new techniques and sound qualities sometimes derived from folk music, flamenco, and jazz. At present, the guitar is probably one of the most widely played instruments in the world.

## Luthiers

When hearing the sound of a guitar, it is worth considering the sensitivity of the hands that built it. The luthiers or *guitarreros*, as they prefer to be called in Spain, are constant creators of harmony who hold so many secrets of the soul of the guitar in the slow rhythm of their daily lives.

It is said that “A guitar is good when the high note sings and the bass laments.”

The guitar has to be balanced, with good bass notes but also good high notes. It has to be powerful, but this strength must not detract from the quality of the harmonics, the timbre, and the color.

## The Secret to the Art of Playing

A good learning method is needed in order to master all the technical possibilities offered by the guitar.

The accentuation of certain notes can give a personal and emotive nature to certain phrases in a piece, above all if this is combined with the muting of other notes. Silence is also part of the music. Music is a language full of rules. Once these have been understood and assimilated, they are designed to be artistically challenged and provide a foothold for the personal creativity of each musician.

The stress or anxiety of the performance can lead guitarists to concentrate more on avoiding mistakes than on the musical expression of what the piece evokes in them. Consequently, mental and muscular relaxation techniques must be learned.

Perseverance is indisputably the first quality which has to be nurtured in order to play an instrument. As Charles Reade says: “Sow a thought and you reap an act. Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny.”

With these words I have tried to sketch an outline and provide some understanding of the passion I feel for music in general, and the guitar in particular. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the best way to understand this would be to allow the music of the guitar into our minds, granting it the freedom to stimulate our sensibilities. I invite you to try this with some tunes I have played and recorded informally on 2 CDs you can hear at <http://www.cirugiaderma.com/guitarra.htm> (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Cover of the CD you can hear at <http://www.cirugiaderma.com/guitarra.htm>

## An Orchestra in His Hands

### *Ode to the guitar*

*Slender pure line  
of a sonorous heart.  
You are clarity truncated in flight:  
singing you survive,  
everything will pass except for your shape.*

PABLO NERUDA

Falling in love, experiencing passion, is a biochemical phenomenon that alters our emotions and moods. It appears at will and grows to colonize the soul of the person it has invaded, like an “alien” in the guise of beauty. This, I think, is how our surprising dermatologist Francisco Russo de la Torre must feel: in love with his guitar.

This young man has already fulfilled his promise in the area of dermatology with a range of professional skills to his name—physician, surgeon, computing expert, teacher, and communicator—but, here, he reveals a new and unexpected facet of a personality we had so far believed to be eminently technical and scientific, namely his love of the guitar, an inclination which he confesses unashamedly, publicizing this with the full strength of his conviction, very nearly to the point of proselytizing.

And such ardor would seem quite understandable in this case.

As was said by Jeffrey Scott Buckley—a singer songwriter and guitarist from the United States of America, known for his singular vocal range of at least four and a half octaves—any man able to master the guitar has an orchestra in his hands. The melody, the harmony, the rhythm produced in the hands of an expert, will fill any

auditorium to overflowing. The genealogically superior strings section of a classical orchestra—violins, violas, cellos, bass, harp, and piano—fall silent and listen when the guitar begins. And I am very clear on this. In the hands of a true musician, the guitar sings and dreams along with those who listen to it. When “the lament of the guitar begins/it is useless to silence it/impossible to silence it.” (Federico García Lorca).

The hands of today’s artist fill this “Art Corner” with sounds and silences, harmonies and feelings, lights and

sparks that endow us with meaning and identity. Music, from the Greek *μουσική [τέχνη]*-*musiké [téchne]*, is more of an art than ever in this environment, the art of the muses, the art of magical hands, which can handle a scalpel as well as a guitar: the hands of a dermatologist who plays the guitar.

Or perhaps a guitarist who practices dermatology?

A. GUERRA