

Programming and Repertoire: Why do we play the music we play?

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Prof. Steve Goss

Composer and Guitarist

Chair of Composition, University of Surrey, UK

Professor of Guitar, Royal Academy of Music, London

www.stephengoss.net

Definitions

- The Musical Canon – the standard repertoire
- WAM – Western Art Music
- Guitar – Spanish? Classical? Nylon String? Acoustic?
- Tradition – The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation

Overview

- How do traditions evolve?
- Who chooses the ‘standard’ repertoire?
- History of the musical canon
- The musical canon and the guitar
- Segovia
- After Segovia
- The future – diversity and inclusion

William Weber, 'History of the Musical Canon' (1999),

One of the most fundamental transformations in Western musical culture has been the rise of a canon of great works from the past. At the end of the sixteenth century, it was unusual for music to remain in circulation for more than a generation; those works that did persist remained isolated from each other, or formed part of pedagogical traditions known by a small group of learned musicians. By the end of the nineteenth century, old music had moved from the musician's study to the concert-hall: it had become established in repertories throughout concert life, dominating many programmes, and was legitimised in critical and ideological terms in which the society as a whole participated.

(Weber, 1999, 336)

Weber's 'tentative set of guide-lines for the evolution of musical canon in Western Art Music':

- (1) 1520–1700: the rise of a significant pedagogical canon, chiefly in the study of works by Josquin Desprez, Palestrina, and Frescobaldi, but with only isolated examples of old works in regular performance;
- (2) 1700–1800: the emergence of performing canons separately in Britain and France, based upon repertories given authority in both musical and ideological terms, but with still fairly limited critical definition in published form;
- (3) 1800–1870: the rise of an integrated, international canon that established a much stronger authority in aesthetic and critical terms, and that moved to the centre of the musical life c.1870;

- (4) 1870–1945: a stable, though not untroubled, relationship between canonic repertoires and contemporary music by which first concert programmes, the opera repertoires, were dominated by the classics, but new works none the less maintained considerable prominence;
- (5) 1945–1980: an extreme, indeed intolerant predominance of classical over contemporary music in both concert and opera repertoires, paralleled by the rise of independent organisations led by composers for the performance of new works;
- (6) 1980- : a limited but still significant re-emergence of taste for new works, chiefly in avant-garde artistic circles separate from traditional concert-halls and opera stages.
- (7) 2000-2021

Can we use this model for the guitar?

- Short answer – No!
- What is a guitar anyway? ‘Classical’, ‘Spanish’?
- When did guitarists start playing historical repertoire?
- When did the guitar’s musical canon take shape?

The Early Canon

- Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909)
- Miguel Llobet (1878-1938)
- Emilio Pujol (1886-1980)
- Andrés Segovia (1893-1987)

In 1971, Segovia stated that he had dedicated his life to four essential tasks:

- (1) To separate the guitar from the mindless folklore type of entertainment.
- (2) To endow it with a repertoire of high quality, made up of works possessing intrinsic musical value, from the pens of composers accustomed to writing for orchestra, piano, violin etc.... Assisted by professional musicologists, I also dedicated myself to capturing delightful works written for the vihuela and lute...
- (3) To make the beauty of the guitar known to the philharmonic public of the entire world.
- (4) Influencing the authorities at the conservatories, academies and universities to include guitar in their instruction programmes on the same basis as the violin, cello, piano, etc.

Segovia's Western Canon: The Conservatoire Canon

- Renaissance
- Baroque
- Classical
- Romantic
- 20th Century
- (21st Century)

Composers of Segovia's published transcriptions

Albéniz

Grieg

Narvaez

Bach

Handel

Purcell

Chopin

Haydn

Rameau

Debussy

Malats

Roncalli

Dowland

Mendelssohn

Scarlatti

Frescobaldi

Milan

Schubert

Froberger

Murcia

de Visee

Granados

Mussorgsky

Weiss

Segovia's Transcriptions

Segovia's transcriptions are more like arrangements. Music is transformed into the guitar's idiom, leaving no trace of the original instrumentation. The heavily edited published scores become a lesson from the maestro.

The Segovia Composers

Indicative list:

Turina, Rodrigo, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Villa-Lobos, Tansman, Ponce

- Segovia's main collaborators were neo-classical, conservative composers. Their music was written in a tonal musical language and romantic in style.
- Segovia's collaborative process was unusually interventionist, almost as if Segovia was a composer manqué.

Segovia and the Mutability of History

- Was Andrés Segovia more interested in making a past for the guitar rather than a future?
- Did he fabricate a tradition – a chimera of transcriptions and pastiche compositions – to emulate the thoroughbred Classical traditions of other instruments (particularly voice, piano, violin, and cello)?

The Mutability of History

‘Who controls the past controls the future:
who controls the present controls the past’

George Orwell – 1984

‘Remembrance of things past is not necessarily
the remembrance of things as they were’

Marcel Proust

Tradition

‘Tradition becomes our security, and when the mind is secure it is in decay.’

Jiddu Krishnamurti

‘The less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it’

Mark Twain

‘Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.’

W. Somerset Maugham

Have things changed in the 50 years since 1971?

- (1) To separate the guitar from the mindless folklore type of entertainment.
- (2) To endow it with a repertoire of high quality, made up of works possessing intrinsic musical value, from the pens of composers accustomed to writing for orchestra, piano, violin etc.... Assisted by professional musicologists, I also dedicated myself to capturing delightful works written for the vihuela and lute...
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Is the Segovia Model fit for the 21st Century?

- What about Julian Bream and John Williams?
- What about improvisation and composition?
- What about stylistic plurality?

How has guitar playing changed since Segovia?

- Training
- Musicianship
- Technique

The Guitar Today

- By any reasonable measure, the guitar is the most popular instrument on the planet. 2020 is seeing the highest number ever sold despite the global recession, with a guitar bought every few seconds. There are now an estimated 780 **million** modern guitars on earth, one for every 100 humans. And the guitar, and its countless close instrumental relatives are integral to many global Music cultures. From the Afghanistan rebab to the Chinese Moon lute to the Venezuelan cuatro, the guitar family is essential to broad music culture.
- This welcome diversity of practice however has come at a cost. Ironically the universality of the instrument has crystallised into isolated silos of activity. And while much energy is spent cultivating or simply preserving a particular guitar style this has often led to the prevention of valuable cultural exchange. Classical guitarists are not privy to the fretboard harmonic knowledge of straight ahead Jazz guitarists who in turn may not appreciate the beautiful subtlety of expression found in the Turkish oud's microtonality or the rhythmic feel of Reggae despite its apparent harmonic simplicity.
- We should now create bridges between these cultural islands. Through the exchange of technical, pedagogical, analytical, and compositional ideas we could not only illuminate but develop the repertoire, knowledge and appreciation of guitar activity. And it is through this diversity of style and approach that we can both capture and help flourish the guitar in the 21st century.

Milton Mermikides (2020)

How can the canon develop?

- Broadening of styles and traditions
- Embracing and celebrating the ‘folkloric’
- More guitarists studying composition as well as more composers studying the guitar in depth
- More transcriptions
- Spend time searching the repertoire
- Finding your own voice through your own repertoire
- There is no ‘correct’ way to put a programme together

Some things to consider...

- The guitar repertoire is large, not small
- We only play a tiny fraction of the wealth of repertoire that we have
- Arguably, most instrumental repertoires are much smaller than ours, only violin, cello, keyboard, and voice are larger and richer – but they are trapped in the WAM tradition
- The guitar is not confined to one tradition – it is diverse and inclusive
- Our repertoire is not calcified like others, it is in a healthy state of flux
- Our repertoire has a very high percentage of works written after 1960

The History of the Guitar Canon

- 19th Century – The Parlour Troubadours
 - a novelty instrument
- 20th Century – The Outsider in the WAM Tradition
 - Composer – Maestro – Edition – Performer
- 21st Century – The Chameleon
 - Plurality, adaptability and diversity are strengths not weaknesses (the John Williams approach)

Topics for Discussion

- Is the WAM tradition better or more important than other music?
- Has the old model of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture largely disappeared?
- Is it time to reject the conservatoire model of WAM repertoire and the chronological concert programme?
- What should/could we learn and play?

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