

# A brief history of the Classical Guitar

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Adapted from Don King's Academy of Guitar site <http://www.wellington-guitar-lessons.com/classical-guitar-history.html>

## Ancestors of the Guitar

Records exist showing that instruments similar to the guitar existed in central Asia some 5,000 years ago. The word guitar means "string" in the ancient Persian language. However, the modern word, guitar derives from the Spanish word 'guitarra', which in turn came from the earlier Greek 'kithara'.



The Moors (Muslims) occupied Spain from 711-1492 AD and students from France and England travelled to Spain to study at the Muslim colleges, Christian and Jewish scholars brought back with them several of the musical instruments now used in Western music. The guitar was among these imports.

During the middle ages the guitar existed in Europe in two main forms; the 'Guitarra Latina', which had curved sides, and the 'Guitarra Morisca' with its oval lute-like sound box.

## The renaissance guitar

By the 16th century the lute had become the favourite instrument in Western Europe. Musicians played it in a way similar to the modern 'finger style' technique although it had between six and 10 courses.

The Renaissance guitar had only 4 courses of gut strings; the first usually single and the other three double. The frets were also made of gut and tied to the neck.

Although nobility favoured the lute, they at first regarded the guitar a simple folk instrument used by the lower classes for strumming their folk songs. Despite this there were several significant music collections published by composers such as Alonso Mudarra in Spain and Adrien le Roy and Guillaume de Morlaye in France. These pieces contain contrapuntal compositions for guitar approaching the complexity and sophistication of those composed for the lute.



## The classical guitar in the Baroque period



Drama, ornamentation, and grandeur typified the Baroque period, which extended from 1600 to 1750. By the beginning of the 17th century, the guitar was becoming more respectable and many fine composers began writing music for it.

The Baroque guitar is the direct ancestor of the modern guitar. It was smaller than the modern guitar, of lighter construction, with gut strings, and like its predecessor, the frets were also usually made of gut, and tied to the neck.

Most Baroque guitars had five courses, the first single and the other four double. Some players preferred octave stringing on the lower one or two courses, while others preferred unison for all the double courses.

During this period, musicians played the guitar in the courts of princes and kings. The construction became more ornate than it had been earlier and guitar builders emerged who were as skilled and well known as Antonio Stradivari, the renowned violin maker.

Some of the leading players/composers during the Renaissance were Gaspar Sanz, Santiago de Murcia and Francisco Guerau in Spain, Robert de Visée in France and the Spaniard Francesco Corbetta.

## The guitar in the classical music era

This period lasted from 1750 to 1820 and featured the music of greats such as Haydn, Mozart, and the young Beethoven.

The guitar generally declined in popularity during this period, and composers who played the guitar were rare because professional players and aristocrats wanted louder and more 'sophisticated' stringed instruments, like the harpsichord, violin, and cello. However the guitar never lost its popularity in Spain.

Towards the end of this period, the guitar itself underwent some radical changes. Firstly, makers added a sixth course. Then, new string making technology allowed for cheap and readily accessible wire-wound basses. These wire-wound strings cut into gut frets and necessitated the use of metal frets. Because these wire-wound bass strings were overpowering with double courses they required single courses for balance.

Toward the end of the century, the guitar with six single strings overshadowed all other types and became the norm. However, there were also other changes to the instrument during this period. For instance, an open sound hole replaced the latticed rosette and luthiers lengthened the neck and fitted it with a raised fingerboard extending to the sound

hole. Nineteen fixed metal frets became standard, and builders raised the bridge, enlarged the body, and introduced fan struts beneath the soundboard to support higher tension strings. They still made treble strings from gut and bass strings from metal wound on silk

### The classical guitar in the Romantic period

The Romantic era in the history of Western music extended from 1825 to 1910 and was called the Romantic era because composers turned their attention to the expression of intense feelings in their music.

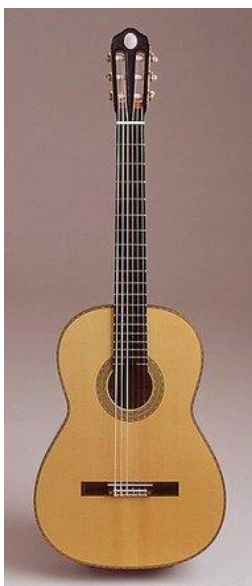
The guitar underwent some further refinements in this period and this contributed to a resurgence in the guitar's popularity during the 19th century. A new generation of virtuoso guitar composer/players began to emerge and improved transportation enabled performers such as Ferdinando Sor, Dionisio Aguado, Matteo Carcassi, Ferdinando Carulli, Mauro Giuliani, and Luigi Legnani to travel and perform throughout Europe.

During this period, the guitar became a widely known and popular instrument once more with the maestros publishing much guitar music for a growing amateur market. Later in the period, the Spaniards Miguel Llobet and Francisco Tarrega emerged as major influencers.



### The guitar in the twentieth century to the present

From the late 19th century onwards, three trends shaped the further development of classic guitar construction, its repertoire, and its playing techniques.



The first trend was the specialization of musicians into either composers or concert performers. The second trend was the growing interest in music from past eras, and the third trend was the move towards long solo performances by virtuosos playing to large audiences.

In all previous eras to ours, virtually all major composers were professional solo artists who performed only their own music. During the late 19th century, many composers became more involved in writing large symphonic works or operas and there was no need for them to perform as soloists.

The invention of recording machines accelerated the trend towards specialization and the growing demand for more recorded music led the recording industry to search for material to record. This had both

negative and beneficial results. In recorded classical music throughout the 20th century, it tended to perpetuate the old and familiar works of composers from the classical and romantic eras to the detriment of interest in new compositions. On the positive side, since the middle of the 20th century, research has uncovered wonderful works by long forgotten composers from medieval, renaissance, and baroque eras and there are now a huge and growing number of recordings of these works.

Today's audiences expect concert guitarists to play a wide variety of music by composers from both the past and the present and to do this they have to study and master a wide variety of techniques. The demands this puts on today's concert artists is another factor that has led to specialised performers.

Another trend in the 20th century that had a big impact in the in the development on guitar construction was the popularity of performances in very large venues to big audiences. This is very different to performances in renaissance and baroque times. In those eras, a professional composer/performer of the guitar or lute had royal or noble patrons and this meant that guitarists usually performed in intimate surroundings to a very small and select audience. As a result, the tone quality of the instrument was more important than loudness.

Today, a professional guitarist is in quite a different situation. Because the days of royal patrons are long gone, in order to make a living, professional soloists have to do recitals to big audiences in large venues.

The Spaniard, Andres Segovia (1893-1987), was the first guitarist to take the classical guitar into the modern concert world of large audiences, sound recording and film. He travelled the globe and encouraged composers to write for the guitar. He widened the audience for the instrument and was a vital force in helping it to regain the respectability it had lost among other serious musicians, critics, and the academic world.

These trends encouraged guitar makers to look for ways to make the concert guitar louder. This search for a louder instrument started with the Spanish guitar maker Antonio Torres in the late 19th century. He increased the size of the sound box and the vibrating string length, but perhaps most importantly of all, he redesigned the internal structure of the soundboard giving it seven internal fan braces instead of three. This raised its volume by distributing vibrations evenly to every part of the body below the sound hole. In recent times, the



Australian Greg Smallman pioneered the invention of a carbon fibre lattice bracing for the soundboard, which has further increased the dynamic range and volume of the instrument.



Today many great concert artists give regular guitar recitals in major cities around the world. The names from the recent century include Julian Bream, John Williams, Elliot Fisk, Sharron Isben, Ben Verdery, Pepe and Angel Romero, Narciso Yepes, David Russel, and Leo Brouwer. Many of these artists have commissioned and encouraged composers to write music for the guitar.

Interestingly, in recent years there has been a different kind of specialisation developing. With the growing interest in historical 'authenticity', many musicians are focusing on a particular eras. For example, there are now artists such as Hopkinson Smith, Paul O'Dette, Jakob Lindberg and Nigel North who play baroque music on copies of baroque guitars and lutes using baroque playing techniques. In addition, there are guitarists such as Carlo Barone and David Staroban who play the romantic repertoire on original or authentic copies of 19th century guitars using original playing techniques. This has brought much of this wonderful music from the past to life again. On the other hand, some performers are starting to specialize in performing only new compositions written specially for the 'new' louder concert guitar. There are also signs of guitarist/composers emerging once more. The history of the classical guitar in future years will no doubt show all these vibrant and positive growing 21st century trends.

For those wanting a much more detailed and precise history of the classical guitar Marshall University have produced a handbook which is available at

[http://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=music\\_faculty](http://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=music_faculty)