

Editorial Article

The Guitar and the Musical Canon: The myths of tradition and heritage in concert repertoire and didactic methodology.

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I

Towards a definition of Musical Canon

In a phrase, the musical canon is the body of ‘great’ works from the past, which form what is often termed ‘the standard repertoire’. The musical canon is central to our linear conception of Western art-music. Music history is taught in terms of ‘epochs’, ‘great composers’ and ‘masterpieces’: Bach’s 48 Preludes and Fugues, the Beethoven Symphonies, Wagner and Verdi Operas and Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Who judges the worth of this core repertoire – audiences, critics, musicologists, performers, composers? Is there any quality control or is the process of selection chaotic, even arbitrary?

Surprisingly, the whole issue of the development of the musical canon has only begun to be addressed by musicologists in the last twenty years. Joseph Kerman’s ‘A Few Canonic Variations’ (1983) is the first published article that tackles the development of the musical canon in any detail. More recently, William Weber, in his ‘History of the Musical Canon’ (1999), traces the etymology and evolution of a whole range of categories of canon. He begins:

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 repertoires 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 goes on to define three principal types of canon:

- (1) Scholarly canon – music studied in theoretical terms; the science of music or the philosophy of music.
- (2) Pedagogical canon – music used for the theoretical study of harmony, counterpoint, analysis and as models for pastiche composition.
- (3) Performing canon – the repertoire of established works performed in the concert hall.

He later argues that ‘performance is ultimately the most significant and critical aspect of musical canon.’ This is because ‘what emerged as the core of canonicity in musical life, beginning in the 18th century, was the public rendition of selected works.’ (Ibid. 340)

To perceive some sense of historical overview in the development of musical canon, Weber suggests the following ‘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 repertoires 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.

(Ibid. 341)

I would certainly agree with Weber's classifications listed above, his historical overview and his assertion that the performing canon is the most significant, but I would like to propose a fourth type of musical canon:

(4) Didactic canon – the repertoire used for the teaching and learning of instrumental technique.

There is an obvious overlap of repertoire between the didactic canon and the performing canon. Concert repertoire is often used to build technique and studies appear on concert programmes. However, the functions of the two canons remain separated by the independent criteria used for the selection of works for each. In some instrumental traditions, notably piano and strings, these criteria are clearly defined; in others, such as the guitar, they are not.

II

The Didactic Canon

In 1822 the Royal Academy of Music was instituted. Significantly, similar institutions began to spring up all over Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century, the instrumental training of professional musicians gradually evolved from a haphazard web of disparate apprenticeships into a well-organised system of professional vocational courses of study, centred at purpose-built institutions. Instrumental pedagogy rapidly developed in order to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for virtuosity. The previous dependence on a published 'method' book became superseded by a far more elaborate oral tradition, based on direct imitation of the teacher, meticulous attention to technical detail and a rigorous programme of didactic repertoire, scales and exercises. Over time didactic and performance traditions became established. A myriad of direct pupil/teacher lines can be traced back through time, for example, Schnabel – Czerny – Beethoven – Clementi or Brendel – Fischer – Ktrause - Liszt.

In the Soviet Union (1917-1990), the government poured vast amounts of public money into the arts. The Moscow and St Petersburg Conservatories flourished and consequently, the "Russian Tradition" of didactic methodology became internationally successful. A huge number of top concert pianists, violinists and cellists are Russian or Russian taught. Since the break up of the Soviet Union, Russian pedagogues have dispersed to various corners of the globe. There is no great secret to the Russian success. The training was based upon a formulaic didactic canon. The order in which pieces and studies should be learned was absolutely critical; the level of clarity of execution and technical control expected before a piece could be dropped for a more demanding one was ruthlessly high. Teaching was founded on the idea that all pupils should be aiming for excellence. There was no distinction between professional training and learning for fun.

The important point is that the didactic canon comprised pieces chosen purely for their value as technique building tools, not because they had any intrinsic musical merit. When it came to preparing for public concerts (and not before), the performance canon would then take over.

Unfortunately, the classical guitar missed out on the conservatoire revolution, principally because it was not an orchestral instrument and it didn't have the popular appeal of the piano. During the nineteenth century, the development of classical guitar technique was left to a small number of isolated autodidacts. The didactic canon that we have inherited from Sor, Aguado, Carcassi, Giuliani et al is disappointingly small and disparate, compared to literature that exists for violin, cello and piano. This repertoire might also appear to be irrelevant to the modern guitarist because the structure of the instrument and the playing technique have evolved so much since the time before Torres. In the 20th century, however, this repertoire was reinvented, adapted and updated, its authenticity redefined. When Segovia selected and published 20 studies by Fernando Sor (1945), he achieved two things: he established a link to a previous performing tradition and he began to address the need for a clearly defined didactic canon for guitarists. His role as editor was central to the success of the publication; the carefully chosen studies were adapted to meet the technical requirements of the modern guitarist, rather than to perpetuate Sor's particular

approach to technique. To take a simple example, No.17 in the collection (Sor's Op.6 No.11 in E minor) is used by Segovia as a study in projecting a melody with the anular finger. Sor wouldn't have used the anular finger, preferring the middle finger for the melody and increased use of the thumb in the arpeggio pattern.

Segovia will not be remembered as a pedagogue, he was a great player who extended the expectations of classical guitar technique and paved the way for the generations of teachers and players who followed him. He was a man with a mission:

I have dedicated my 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, 1971)

To take up Segovia's final point, the guitar's eventual acceptance as a first study instrument came as recently as 1959, in the UK, when Hector Quine began teaching at the Royal Academy of Music in London – an option unavailable to Julian Bream who studied piano and cello at the Royal College of Music a decade or so earlier. The classical guitar can now be studied in most of the music conservatories and universities in Europe and the USA, but it will take time for a pedagogical tradition to develop and longer still before the classical guitar's didactic canon becomes firmly established.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that Segovia revolutionised the concept of the guitar and the musical canon. I would like to explore some of the implications of Segovia's statement in more detail in the next section.

III The Performing Canon

Segovia's Mission Statement

Firstly, it is interesting to observe the order in which Segovia makes his points; this suggests a curiously weighted agenda. It is evident that the lowbrow, popular culture image of the guitar troubled Segovia greatly; more, it would seem, than its lack of repertoire or its unfamiliarity as a recital instrument. The use of the words 'mindless' and 'entertainment' are particularly telling; one might infer snobbishness or even an inferiority complex – hardly surprising considering the hostility he faced and describes in his autobiography. It is clear, however, that for Segovia the guitar should be an instrument of high culture.

Segovia's second point begs much discussion. What does he mean by 'intrinsic musical value'? Is his 'repertoire of high quality' to be part of the mainstream musical performing canon? The implication is clear; guitar music should be written by professional composers and not by guitarists who are amateur composers. He goes on to mention 'academic' transcriptions of works for lute and vihuela; this is where the nature of the guitar's musical canon makes a sudden change of direction. Segovia is claiming a whole new area of repertoire for the guitar; he is inventing a new history, an imaginary line of progression stretching from the Renaissance to the present day, an artifice. It is this re-invented history of the guitar that forms the basis of the contemporary canon, which permeates not only recital programmes but also seeps down through college and grade examination syllabuses to the earliest stages of learning the instrument.

Composers such as Dowland, Bach, Weiss, Scarlatti, Albeniz and Granados are at the very heart of the guitarist's modern repertory. Astonishingly none of them wrote a single note of guitar music. In the case of the Dowland, Bach and Weiss, this might seem like splitting hairs, given the perceived close kinship between guitar and lute. But the jewel in the crown, Bach's so-called 'lute works', is based on a near fallacy. Not even the two works designated for lute by Bach – BWV 995 and 998 – are comparable to the solo violin or cello music, where Bach rethinks his and the instruments' idiom to create something utterly specific. The 'lute' works are of course masterpieces, but they are not literally playable on the lute as Bach wrote them, doubling as keyboard works with only minimal adaptation to the lute's idiom.

Segovia commissioned much new work, although his anti-modernist taste dictated a preference for selecting more conservative, Romantic composers rather than composers at the cutting edge of contemporary music. Some of these composers were fairly mainstream, (Turina, Rousell, Ibert, Torroba, Villa-Lobos), but the majority were minor figures.

The Performing Canon after Segovia

Largely due to the efforts of Julian Bream, Segovia's vision of a repertoire of new music of quality integrated into the musical mainstream was at least partially realised in the 1970s and 1980s. For a few years it seemed that most important living composers had written for the guitar; the list included: Britten, Tippett, Walton, Berio, Takemitsu, Henze, Reich, Maxwell Davies, Elliott Carter, Babbitt and Ginastera. Paradoxically, this brief flowering coincided with a widespread public hostility to new music (see Weber's chart above, point 5) and much of this fecund repertoire received, and still receives, tragically few performances. Players find these pieces unidiomatic and audiences find them difficult.

More recently, there has been an increase in the number of performances of new works composed by guitarists. Is this because the idiomatic comfort and familiarity, and therefore ease of execution, of these pieces is seducing guitarists? Or is it simply the case that the guitar world is becoming increasingly ghettoised - guitarists travelling the world, playing music written by guitarists to audiences made up of guitarists?

IV

Escaping the Tyranny of the Museum of Musical Masterpieces: The changing curriculum and the new musicology

Today's climate of postmodernism and pluralism, the supremacy of Western art-music and its canon is being challenged. If modernism dealt with the refined and idealised, the scientific, the exclusive; then postmodernism deals with the spontaneous and contradictory, the intuitive, the inclusive. In the words of Robert Fink 'it is hopeless to insist that music reflect, not the *heterotopia* in which we live, but some one of the many utopias in which we no longer believe.' (Fink, 1999, 132)

New music no longer has to measure up to its past. The clear line between high art and low art, that worried Segovia so much, is being eaten away. As Nicholas Cook puts it:

...perhaps the most telling contrast between today's musical world and the ways of thinking about it that we have inherited from the nineteenth century concerns high and low art. The very terms seem suspect today, and even if you wanted to use them it would be hard to be confident about what is high art and what is low art.... Writers about music in the academic tradition had no such qualms. High art, or 'art' music, meant the notation-based traditions of the leisured classes, and above all the great repertoire of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Low art meant everything else, that is to say the limitless variety of popular and mainly non-notated – and hence historically irretrievable – musical traditions.

(Cook, 1998, 43)

Cook largely attributes this change to the ready availability of other musical styles through recordings. Notation ceases to become a necessity when digital recordings can provide a definitive, authentic text.

...music becomes an element in the definition of personal lifestyle, alongside the choice of car, clothes, or perfume. Deciding whether to listen to Beethoven, or Bowie, or Balinese music becomes the same kind of choice as deciding whether to eat Italian, Thai, or Cajun tonight.

(Ibid, 41)

The diversity of influences available to today's composers generates a multiplicity of stylistic possibilities. Paul Griffiths defines postmodern music as:

Music which is no longer arrowed to the future but timeless in its survey of as much human culture as its composer can encompass.

(Griffiths, 1986, 122)

The resultant broadening out of musical perspective implied by Griffiths has been reflected in radical changes in music education and in musicology. In 1988, the new GCSE music exam was introduced; an exam which gave the same weight to world music and popular music as it did to 'classical' music. This radical shift in emphasis has now filtered up through the whole higher education system. In most universities, as part of a music degree, there are undergraduate modules in such diverse fields as 'progressive rock', 'jazz studies' and 'music from other cultures'. It is now possible to read for a BA in popular music, music technology, commercial music and ethnomusicology. In the academic fraternity, specialists in popular music, film music, and other non-classical disciplines are in high demand. Popular music composition is being recognised as a research equivalent activity. The new musicology is challenging the way in which we view old music, questioning the musical canon and tackling issues such as gender, ethnicity and contextuality.

For the first time general music students are studying guitar music. Paradoxically, the long sought academic acceptance of the guitar into the musical mainstream has come not with the classical guitar, but with the electric guitar; Jimmy Hendrix and Van Halen, not Fernando Sor and Segovia, Jerry Garcia not Gerald Garcia.

The cross fertilisation of musical styles has led to several high profile art-music commissions for electric guitar, including: Steve Reich's *Electric Counterpoint* (1987) for Pat Metheny and Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Blood on the Floor* (1997) for John Scofield. Arguably, the word 'guitar' has come to mean anything but 'classical guitar'.

The cultural importance and iconoclastic power of the electric guitar has almost totally eclipsed the insular, impotent world of the classical guitar. Perhaps the time has come to shed the fragile pretensions of Segovia's high-art performance canon and re-embrace the 'mindless folklore type of entertainment'. It is possible that the notion of a respectable, adult repertoire has been a chimera, while didactic methodology has remained in its infancy.

So we are left not with answers, but with questions: How can the classical guitarist and guitar teacher react to this paradigmatic shift in the musical aesthetic? Is there a place for the classical guitar in this brave new world, or is it condemned to a bleak future in the musical wilderness? How does the new status quo affect teaching at grass roots level? How relevant is current didactic material to the new emerging canon? How many students understand the concept 'classical guitar' when they enrol for lessons; and how does this influence the teaching of music through the guitar?

The canonisation of the guitar repertory that took place in the 20th century was driven by a desire for acceptance into the serious musical mainstream. It was assumed that this acceptance could only come about if the musical quality of the performing canon was sufficiently high. The resultant, obsessive lust for great music led guitarists to colonise the lute and vihuela repertories and to invade the musical territory of the keyboard player.

In the development of the guitar student, the very idea of a privileged repertory – the performing canon – is a belated one in the setting of the concert hall. As we have seen, such discrimination is more relevant at an earlier stage, in the classroom – the 'didactic' canon. Indeed, it is the quality of this autonomous didactic canon which will give rise to the more flexible, less hidebound performing repertory argued for here.

References

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