



# Six Strings

## Seeking Classical Stature

CURTIS ENROLLS ITS FIRST CLASSICAL GUITARISTS IN FALL 2011. THE DEAN—A GUITARIST HIMSELF—EXPLAINS WHY CURTIS BIDED ITS TIME BEFORE CREATING ITS UNIQUE GUITAR CURRICULUM.

BY JOHN R. MANGAN, PH.D.

*The classical guitar* has always had an uneasy relationship with the major American conservatories. When I took my first guitar lesson in 1972, Peabody Conservatory had one of the only programs. And truth be told, at that time, the idea that the guitar would ever be taught at the renowned Curtis Institute of Music—the holiest of holies, the quintessential conservative conservatory, what many considered the most elite music school on the planet—well, colonizing Mars would have seemed like a more likely undertaking.

But if Curtis was not ready for the guitar back then, the opposite was also true. Indeed the guitar's uneasy relationship with conservatories extends to much of the classical music world in the 20th century and, some would argue, continues to the present day. The reasons are relatively straightforward, and classical guitarists of my vintage (I was born in 1965) can recite them by heart. As compared with major solo and chamber instruments such as the piano and violin, the guitar's native repertoire, its pedagogy, and its reputation as the province of amateurs have conspired in relegating it to a substandard position. Or so the story goes.

The recent announcement that Curtis will begin offering classical guitar studies in Fall 2011—almost twenty years after Eastman, Juilliard, and Oberlin, more than thirty years

after Yale, and more than forty after Peabody and New England Conservatory—represents a striking moment of arrival in the instrument’s complicated history.

### THE SEGOVIA SCHOOL

In the 20th century and well before, the guitar had always been popular in informal settings from folk to flamenco. But the 1960s saw nothing less than an explosion of interest in the classical guitar. This owed to the general popularization of the instrument, particularly through rock and roll; and to the incessant touring, recording, and master classes given by the famed Spaniard Andrés Segovia, the leading guitarist in the post-World War II era and the one who did the most to establish the guitar as a solo concert instrument on the leading stages of the Western world. On Segovia’s coattails, the careers of the next generation—John Williams, Julian Bream, Pepe Romero, and Christopher Parkening, among others—would continue to advance the cause. One of Mr. Segovia’s oft-recited missions in life was to encourage leading conservatories everywhere to take up teaching the guitar. While music schools and departments in colleges and universities across the United States were swept up in the six-string euphoria, almost all of the major American conservatories remained circumspect.

In fact, the fever of collegiate interest proved difficult to sustain. A market correction—some would say backlash—was inevitable, and the classical guitar would go on to become in many ways a victim of its own success. On campuses nationwide, the demand for teachers grew; and it became immediately clear that few of them had enjoyed the benefit of any kind of systematic training in the kind of college-level programs they were now being asked to put in place. They were mostly self-taught and, more to the point, unsupported by any kind of uniform, time-tested pedagogy or teaching tradition. All of this stood in stark contrast to the long-established schools of teaching enjoyed by the piano, the violin, and virtually all the orchestral instruments.

What the guitar did have were a few obscure instruction manuals from a handful of even more obscure 19th-century guitarists, and something called “the Segovia school”—though neither the legitimate nor self-anointed Segovia disciples (nor Mr. Segovia himself) could agree on exactly what it was. Added to all this was the reality that classical guitar students, then as now, usually come to the instrument later than their piano or orchestral counterparts. And then there was the repertoire: a compelling body of Italian, Spanish and Spanish-influenced pieces, to be sure; but no works of any significance from Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, or Brahms.

Despite these challenging circumstances, the classical guitar advanced aggressively in American higher education without any apparent apprehension. Teachers were appointed, auditions were played, students were admitted, recitals were performed, undergraduate and graduate degrees were conferred. No doubt most of the instructors, dependent on trial and error in the teaching studio, were only a few steps ahead of their pupils.

The result was not pretty. With few exceptions, the line of newly credentialed classical guitarists who broke over the field in the 1970s served only to dilute, even to annihilate, the performance standards established by Segovia and his immediate successors. Critics wondered aloud why so many of these guitarists played so poorly as compared to other instrumentalists with similar degrees. Why could they not play louder, faster? Why were they such poor sight readers? And what exactly were those pieces they were playing? Who had ever heard of Sor or Giuliani? And they wouldn’t dare play Bach on the guitar, would they? The fact that many of these guitarists seemed to rely heavily upon transcriptions seemed to be the clearest evidence that the instrument was profoundly, perhaps even hopelessly, challenged in terms of repertoire.

Despite these dire circumstances, there was the small circle of post-Segovia guitarists cited above who played the classical guitar at an astonishingly high level, recorded for major labels, played solo recitals all over the world, and regularly performed concertos with orchestras. But in trying to seem immune to any hint of an inferiority complex, these guitarists sometimes made matters worse. On countless album covers in the 1960s and ’70s, one velour-clad classical guitarist after the next announced him- or herself “virtuoso” in large block print, with hair swept back like a lion’s mane. Or there they were on horseback,

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guitar in hand, dressed in a manner suggestive enough to conjure Lady Godiva. Worse yet were the legions of self-proclaimed virtuosos who still played at or near a student level. On the verge of the 1980s, the guitar had a serious artistic and public relations problem. It still seemed far from being universally recognized as a “serious” instrument.

In 1983, when I entered a guitar program at a small liberal arts college outside Rochester, New York, classical guitarists were hard at work addressing the pedagogical and repertoire-related deficiencies that had long plagued the instrument—addressing them almost to a fault, actually. By that time, many players had fetishized technical studies—they talked endlessly about metronome settings and scale speed, played arpeggios on open strings for weeks at a time, and said things like, “I’m getting the notes right first; I’ll worry about the music later.”

In terms of repertoire building, many guitarists worked to entice composers to write new works, with many notable or even spectacular outcomes including Benjamin Britten’s *Nocturnal*, one of the greatest pieces ever written for the instrument. But such rare diamonds were surrounded by piles of substandard works solicited by players blindly committed to expanding their options at all cost, further undercutting the efforts of those lobbying to advance the classical guitar as a serious instrument. I remember sitting in a concert hall in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1987 while a guitarist onstage was accompanied by a “ghost carrier”—an actor dressed in black skirting up and down the aisles carrying a large boom box that was playing a version of the same piece from a recording by a then recently-deceased guitarist. I remember sitting there thinking, “Is this really helping?”

(From top) David Starobin and Jason Vieaux are the founders of Curtis’s new guitar curriculum. They join the faculty in Fall 2011.

## THE RIGHT MOMENT

Over the last twenty years, classical guitarists have done a lot of soul searching, and their level of teaching, performing, technique, general artistry—along with the quality of the repertoire—have risen dramatically. Two of the artists who have been responsible for this progress are David Starobin and Jason Vieaux, both of whom will join the Curtis faculty next fall as the founders of the classical guitar program. *Soundboard Magazine* calls Mr. Starobin “arguably the most influential American classical guitarist of the twentieth century.” Mr. Vieaux is widely recognized as the leading young American guitarist on the scene today. Both artists have extensive discographies and major performing careers. No doubt they will attract the finest young players in the world; and in a learning structure unique to Curtis, all students admitted to the program will study with both teachers.

David Starobin alone has had 350 new works written for him by renowned contemporary composers such as Carter, Crumb, Babbitt, and Foss. In recent decades a number of other important composers—Henze, Berio, Rochberg, Corigliano, Tower, Takemitsu, Reich, and Rouse, among many others—have deepened the classical guitar’s repertoire with solo and chamber works as well as concertos.

The familiar old concerns still echo occasionally, but younger players nowadays are more self-assured and less burdened by uncertainty than the players of my generation. They can’t remember a time when the classical guitar was not part of the curriculum at Juilliard, Eastman, Oberlin, or Yale. They know they belong.

Still, many promising young guitarists have no doubt quietly wondered if they would ever see the day when the heavy, ornate doors of 1726 Locust Street would be open to them. Would Curtis ever modify its status as the last of the elite American—and among the last of the world’s elite—conservatories *not* to have a guitar program? They need wait no longer, though they may wonder why they have waited so long.

Simply put, Curtis was waiting, too: until it was sure that the classical guitar was being taught and played on a level where it could hold its own with the conservatory’s other instrumental departments. We believe that time has come. Upon the announcement of his appointment, Mr. Starobin eloquently captured the significance of this moment for the entire guitar world. “The inauguration of the Curtis Institute’s guitar program is a milestone in the instrument’s history. With its inclusion at Curtis, arguably the world’s finest music conservatory, the guitar and its repertoire continue their steady ascent toward equal standing among the instruments and music of the great classical tradition.”

And now, on to Mars. ♦

*John R. Mangan is the dean of the Curtis Institute of Music.*



### Video Online

A chat with David Starobin and Jason Vieaux

[www.curtis.edu/video](http://www.curtis.edu/video)