

Justin Holland and the Classical Roots of the American Guitar Sound

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A quintessentially American instrument, the guitar has been the voice of generations of American players in a variety of musical styles. While each stylistic tradition traces its own oral history and is defined by a unique musical vocabulary, American guitar styles share common roots in the classical and fingerstyle traditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Seminal players of this time set the standards for the development of their chosen styles and the establishment of a true American guitar culture. In well rounded professional lives and an artistic immersion in both European traditions and contemporary American sounds, they struck a balance that has been passed on to today's players. In this way, the life and work of the most well-known American guitarist of the 19th century, Justin Holland (1819-1887), provides insight into the the experience of the modern American guitarist.

Justin Holland, American classical guitarist



Justin Holland, considered to be the most sophisticated guitarist of the 19th century, was a conservatory-trained classical musician who worked as a performer, composer, arranger, teacher, and publisher. He published thirty-five original pieces and over three hundred arrangements of European operatic themes and American popular dances and songs. The first American to write and publish a method for the guitar in 1876, Holland's method is the first American perspective on leading European guitar pedagogy and American performance practice. His pedagogy synthesized the approaches of the European masters Ferdinando Carulli, Matteo Carcassi, Mauro Giuliani, Fernando Sor, Dionisio

Aguado, and Johann Kaspar Mertz.¹ *Holland's Comprehensive Method for the Guitar* was printed in several editions until 1908, and became the best-selling American music publication of the 19th century. Inspired by the needs of his students, Holland's body of work includes pieces for all levels, a detailed approach to technique, standard notation, and fingerboard knowledge, and annotated studies from the European masters.

Holland's own music education was based in both the classical and popular music communities. An African-American born free in Norfolk, VA, he moved to Boston, MA in 1833 to escape an environment that was becoming increasingly dangerous for young black men.² In Boston, the leading music city in the country, Holland heard Spanish guitarist Mariano Perez at the Lion Theatre and was inspired to begin lessons on guitar and flute with members of the Ned Kendall Brass Band and the Philharmonic Society of Boston. After eight years of study and saving for tuition, he was accepted at the Oberlin Conservatory's classical program for the 1841-2 academic year. Determined to immerse himself in the cutting edge of classical guitar pedagogy, Holland lived in Mexico for two years to learn Spanish so that he could study the methods of Sor and Aguado in their original language. He returned to Oberlin in 1845, married shortly after, and moved to Cleveland to set up a teaching studio. He began publishing in 1848 with S. Brainard's Sons/Cleveland. By the 1870's, through the success of his works and Brainard's advertisements in its monthly catalogue, Holland was recognized as one of the country's premier guitarists.³

¹ These players ushered in a Golden Age of the Guitar across Europe that lasted from 1810-1856 - spreading "Guitaromania" to England and America. Barbara Clemenson, "Justin Holland: Black Guitarist in the Western Reserve" (Cleveland: Journal of the Case Western Reserve University), 3.

² After Nat Turner's Revolt in 1831, Virginia became a hostile environment for the free black population. Reaction to this uprising resulted in the disbanding of organized emancipation movements, a rise in owners' fear of their slaves, and an increase in segregation and discrimination of free blacks. Barbara Clemenson, "Justin Holland: Black Guitarist in the Western Reserve", 2.

³ Ernie Jackson, "The Music of Justin Holland" (Seattle: Cherry Lane Press, 1995), 3.

Holland in the Context of the Classical Guitar Community

In the context of the classical guitar community, Holland's American approach to the classical guitar parallels that of the European masters recognized as standard in the modern tradition. Holland began his guitar study in Boston in 1833, six years before the death of Fernando Sor in 1839. He studied the methods of Sor and Aguado and began his teaching career during the early 1840's - during Aguado's lifetime - and began his publishing career in 1848, one year before Aguado's death in 1849. Holland's acclaimed method was published in 1876, a year before Francisco Tarrega's concert debut in 1877. Twenty-one years after his own death, Holland's method entered its final publication by the Oliver Ditson Co. Boston/New York/Chicago in 1908, one year before the European concert debut of Andres Segovia (1893-1987) - the guitarist considered to be 'the father of the modern classical tradition'. By the time Segovia performed his American debut in New York's Town Hall on January 8, 1928, Holland's work had fostered a vibrant American classical guitar community.

As did his European contemporaries, Holland incorporated the popular songs and dance forms from his national culture into his repertoire. From Carulli to Segovia, each of the seminal European players had performed, arranged, or composed pieces "in the style of" popular operatic themes and/or folk songs from their home countries. While he embraced this European repertoire, Holland published arrangements of popular American songs, such as "'Tis the Last Rose of Summer" and "Spanish Fandango". He also composed in popular ballroom dance forms like the waltz and the Rochester Scottish - fostering a classical repertoire that reflected American culture.

With the influence of Segovia during the mid-twentieth century, American classical guitarists developed a general perspective on their style that was Euro-centric and focused on attaining a professional career as a recitalist. Segovia's unique musical voice, virtuosity, stage presence, and recordings made him an international household name. His enormous popularity and influence on guitar pedagogy made it possible for the European guitar tradition to flourish at a large number of American universities and conservatories. It wasn't

until the end of the century, following Segovia's death, that classical players gained broad acceptance for embracing their American roots.⁴ Today's classical players who find themselves drawn to repertoire that reflects their American experience and have careers that balance a variety of musical endeavors are following in an American classical guitar tradition passed down by Justin Holland.

Holland in the Context of the Popular Guitar Communities

Although he was a classical guitarist, the influence of Holland and his classical contemporaries extended to American players in the popular guitar communities. Before the twentieth century, printed music was the main vehicle for the dissemination of compositions and pedagogy. As the most prolific guitar composer/arranger of his time, Holland's name was well known among professionals and upper and middle class amateurs who had caught the parlor guitar craze. When C.F. Martin began manufacturing guitars in 1859 and later when Sears Roebuck made them available through mail-order in 1890, this classical influence spread to those who did not have access to formal training. By the late 19th century, one of the most popular pieces of music performed and arranged by rural players was the "Spanish Fandango" - published by Holland in the 1860's as part of his collection *Winter Evenings* - and included in other standard methods. This piece was so popular that blues players still refer to its "open G" tuning as "Spanish".⁵

Just as Holland embraced popular themes in his classical works, professionals in the popular guitar communities assimilated classical techniques and repertoire in their approach to the instrument. With the popular American guitar styles we identify today as blues, folk, and jazz in their beginning stages (or in the case of jazz, years away), professional players

⁴ This common players' perspective on Segovia's musical values and influence is articulated by Victor Anand Coehlo, who writes that Segovia, "constructed an impenetrable firewall around the Western art tradition" of the guitar. Victor Anand Coehlo, "Picking Through Cultures," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, ed. Coehlo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

⁵ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 46.

chose the repertoire that was popular - often crossing stylistic boundaries that today would seem insurmountable. This multi-stylistic approach to music crossed racial boundaries as well. Even during the time of slavery in the South, the majority of full-time musicians were African-Americans - playing every kind of music at the events of plantation society. By the mid-19th century, the guitar was an integral part of the dance band, minstrel show, and vaudeville orchestras at the national level.

Holland's career precedes many of the artists we now consider to be the early figures of blues, country, fingerstyle, and jazz playing. Holland's method was published in 1876, three years after the birth of W.C. Handy - "The Father of the Blues". Holland's method entered its final publication in 1908 - the same year in which the first blues tune, "I Got the Blues," was published in New Orleans. One year later, W.C. Handy premiered his hit, "Memphis Blues". Handy's subsequent success as a songwriter and recording artist in the 1910's helped launch the "Blues Craze".⁶ The popularity of early "classic" blues on these recordings would inspire song-catchers in the 1920's to search for rural guitar players who had been performing with a traditional, fingerstyle acoustic approach to the popular guitar styles that we know as American roots music.

The fingerstyle acoustic artists heard on these early recordings include blues players: John Hurt (1893-1966), Charley Patton (c. 1887-1934), the Rev. Gary Davis (1896-1972), Son House (1902-1988), Robert Johnson (1911-1938), and Muddy Waters (1913-1983). In the following decades, the American classical influence would be felt in the fingerstyle country playing of artists like Merle Travis (1917-1983), Chet Atkins (1924-2001), Jerry Reed (1937-2008); the solo steel-string playing of John Fahey (1939-2001); and in the solo jazz approach of Gene Bertoncini (b. 1937).

⁶ Like Justin Holland and many musicians of the day, W.C. Handy had a multi-faceted professional career. It included free-lance performance on cornet, arranging, composing, recording, teaching, and band-leading. Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 17.

Modern American Guitar Culture

Contemporary American guitarists think of the American Guitar Sound as a language made up of several distinct stylistic dialects that share a common vernacular. Throughout the twentieth century, each style developed its own traditions, parameters of technique, musicianship, and instrumentation, and communities of professional players, amateurs, and listeners. The dialects include: classical, folk, blues, country, fingerstyle acoustic, jazz, and rock. Extensive collaboration and inspiration among players from these communities resulted in a common American guitar sound detectible in each style of guitar performance. This vernacular is a set of techniques, sensibilities, and aesthetics that serve as a common ground among the various styles. Players combine this common musical vocabulary with the unique traditions of their chosen style and their contemporary influences to create a sound that is distinctly “blues” or “jazz” and also distinctly American. In this way, American guitarists are pulling from the past to make music that reflects their current American experience.⁷

Following in the footsteps of their musical ancestors by mixing the sounds of the past and present, American guitarists bring their music to the public in equally varied professional careers. Throughout their musical lives in American guitar culture, guitarists work as performers, composers, arrangers, publishers, directors, and teachers. Unique among instrumentalists, American guitarists constantly collaborate across stylistic boundaries - recording and performing together, and incorporating vocabulary from different stylistic dialects. In their work, today’s professional players are following in a American guitar tradition documented in the work of Justin Holland and passed on through generations of players.

⁷ Kimberley Perlak, Dissertation, *Finding A Voice in the American Classical Guitar Vernacular* (Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 21.

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