

# THE VERSATILE GUITAR

by Liveryman Ivor Mairants

**OFTEN, when I am introduced to someone unconnected with my work and it transpires that I am a guitarist, eyebrows are raised, a quizzical expression is assumed, sometimes tinged with puzzled amusement.**

Apparently coming face to face with a new exotic breed of string picker or plucker is a strange encounter. Either I am given the 'once over' as a curio or I am bombarded with questions. Had I been any other instrumentalist, the conversation would probably have proceeded in a conventional way.

What is the reason for this curious behaviour? Even conductors and bandleaders have evinced this trait when engaging a new boy.

Take my first engagement. Aged twenty, I was sent to a famous bandleader for interview. After reading my letter of introduction he said "Yes. You look alright. Can you sing?" I had never sung in public but what could I lose? I said "Yes" and got the job.

After a week's rehearsals with Percival Mackey's Band, I discovered that although the group boasted a real tenor I was required to sing the light rhythmic numbers. The following Monday we opened at the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square. I sang a number called "Collegiana" on stage through a megaphone! That was in 1928. In these days of guitar popularity are things different? Maybe.

In Mantovani's orchestra, the guitarist was expected to play all the written solos and background fill-ins on the acoustic unamplified guitar which struggled to be heard, especially on tour then unaided by recording studio amplification. Soon after, I introduced my amplifier and convinced 'Monty' that an electric acoustic instrument would sound as warm and natural as an acoustic one but with a smoother voice and phrasing. Thereafter, I was able to use an amplified guitar whenever I considered it suitable.

Few composers can score practical guitar parts or write genuine 'folk music' for film backgrounds. Dmitri Tiomkin, with whom I worked on the film 'Sundowners' was one of them. He would take a full orchestration and sometimes reduce it to a few instruments.

For example, he decided that only one scene required harmonica, guitar and bass. When some musicians complained that they were being cut out, he observed: "Maybe nobody in the audience will hear but I am born different"! When asked about the guitar, he replied "Naturally, I love the guitar and all the different kinds of music played upon it". He backed his

words with actions. In the film 'Rio Bravo', he arranged the music for trumpet and six guitars. Other musical directors are less demanding.

An American friend, Tommy Tedesco—considered to be Hollywood's leading studio guitarist—told me that he has a standard guitar cadenza embracing Latin American or Spanish backgrounds. Applying his musical ingenuity he was able to use it for a 'special' in Mexico required by John Denver: then for a television episode of 'Charlie's Angels' set in Puerto Rico and finally in the film 'Cinderella Lullaby' set, this time in Bolivia!!

Guitar notation is written in what is known in 'the trade' as Octave Transposed Pitch (OTP), i.e. an octave higher than it sounds. However, this was unknown to Schoenberg as I discovered when called upon to play the guitar part in 'The Dance Round the Golden Calf' from his opera 'Moses & Aaron'. The score contains parts for two guitars both written in bass clef.

On another occasion I was asked to play the guitar part in Stravinsky's 'Tango' with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. I brought along my classical guitar and played the part as directed. After rehearsal the conductor, Bruno Maderna, asked me whether I had an electric guitar. I answered in the affirmative. "Good", said he. "I would like to hear you play the piece on that instrument". The result was that my amplifier stood proudly in front of the orchestra on the platform of the Festival Hall to the surprise of the audience but to the satisfaction of Maderna.

I have already mentioned the acoustic plectrum guitar and the acoustic electric guitar, the latter being fitted with an electronic pick-up. There is also another version similar to an acoustic guitar but with a shallower body in which two pick-ups are fitted into the top and permanently screwed in. This is the favoured guitar of the 'Jazz, Pop and Rock' performers.

There is also the solid electric as distinct from the acoustic electric instrument (acoustic electric is fitted with 'floating' pick-ups. An electric acoustic with pick-ups set into the top), sometimes described as a "cricket bat" by irreverent players!

The most popular of the so-called solid guitars are 'attributed' to Les Paul and Leo Fender. The 'Les Paul' design is the more traditional and is recognisable by its typical body shape and headstock, fitted with two pick-ups. In comparison, the Fender has a somewhat distorted shape possessing three pick-ups and six tuning pegs on one side.

Amongst the most musically advanced and inventive of the current

virtuoso performers is Pat Metheny, an American who used no fewer than nine guitars in a phenomenal stage performance in London. But amongst classical performers, Segovia 1893-1987 stands supreme. I first heard him at the Wigmore Hall in 1937 and a decade later I received tuition from him.

After several visits to Spain, I was 'seduced' by the art of Flamenco and in 1959 I published "The Flamenco Guitar", a tutor book. However, in spite of its great fascination, the Flamenco Guitar has been a poor relation even in Spain.

As a short guide to the perplexed, may I conclude with a few historical facts. During the 18th and early 19th centuries the guitar enjoyed great popularity. The instrument became associated with a number of virtuosi of whom an Italian, Nicolo Paganini, best known as a violinist, was one. The Spaniard, Fernando Sor, was another famous performer and composer amongst many. Although interest flagged in the mid-19th century, Francisco Tarrega initiated a renaissance of the guitar, subsequently developed by the well known contemporary classical performers amongst whom Segovia, Julian Bream and John Williams are arguably best known.

In the United States, the 'Blues' drew many musicians to the fold as did Country Music and Jazz. Each style of guitar playing from Jazz to Folk led to the development of an appropriate type instrument.

It is therefore not so perplexing that this many splendoured and versatile instrument should prompt so many quizzical questions.



Ivor Mairants at the Broadgate Arena, during May Jazz-at-Lunchtime Week 1992. Photo: Dennis H. Matthews.