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First strides in the performances of guitar concertos in Greece

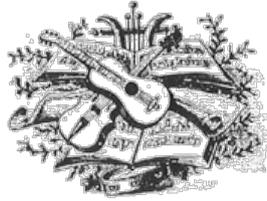


The first performances of guitar concertos in Greece are examined in the text that follows. The historical facts that will be presented took place between the late 50's and the early 60's. Having as a starting-point these data, thoughts, comments and findings concerning the conditions that lead to guitar development in Greece during the later half of the twentieth century will be formulated. Consequently we will touch upon an aspect of the course the first professional guitar soloists of the country have followed up until today.

For many people, the presence of concertos in the repertoire of an instrument constitutes a sufficient indication of the instrument's potential for solo performances. Specifically since the 19th century, the concerto has served beautifully the needs of the composers and the performers and it contributed towards an increase in their popularity among audiences of their era. As for the composers, the relationship that develops between the soloist and the orchestra, offers a rich terrain where their musical theories could be developed: the contradiction that results from the strength of "one being" against "a whole," the possibility of exchanging musical theories within a framework of discussion, collaboration, interaction or even clash and conflict all concurred to attract the composers' interest for the concerto. But for the soloists as well, the high level of technical grounding that is usually required, provided the opportunity to set off (or show off) their virtuosity. It is not accidental that the solo concerto (with one instrument in the role of the soloist) was flourishing during the time the great virtuosos put in their appearance in Europe in the mid nineteenth century. It was furthermore promoted by the very same virtuosos who played a key role in the establishment and the spread of the recital. The uncontested instrument that prevailed was the piano, for which the greatest number of concertos was written and which enjoyed the greatest acclaim.

As far as the guitar is concerned, circumstances were not as favorable during the same era. Especially during the later part of the 19th century, the production of guitar concertos provided the repertoire of the instrument in discussion with only a few compositions and those of a rather limited range and effect since the composers who worked on them can be counted on the fingers of single hand. Examining the reasons that lead to this state of events is not included in the purpose of this study. However, we ought to underline that the low sound pressure level of the instrument did play a significant role—a sound level which did not allow the guitar to juxtapose the massive sound of the orchestra—as well as the shortage of virtuosos competent enough to meet the demands the role of a soloist pertained. These facts in connection with the prevalent bias of the guitar's "folk" nature, diminished the prestige of the instrument and placed it at a disadvantage to such instruments as the violin or the piano.

Interest around the topic was rekindled during the 20th century, parallel to the rapid increase in the popularity of the guitar. Andrés Segovia held the leading role in the developments by breaking down the barriers that existed in the repertoire of the guitar and by persuading composers, whose origin was not from the terrain of the guitar, to compose for the specific instrument. Among the first performances of concertos for guitar and orchestra is included a performance by Segovia, Concerto in D Major, op. 99, of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, on the 28th of October in 1939.^[1] According to the research that has been carried out thus far, it appears that the first concerto that was written during the 20th century was by the Mexican Rafael Adame and it was performed for the first time in the city of Mexico in 1933.^[2] It is evident that since then the composition of a great number of concertos by well known composers has been an indication of the development that the guitar underwent.



In Greece, according to existing evidence, the first performances of compositions for guitar and orchestra took place towards the end of the 50's. The leading guitarists as a matter of fact were still novice guitarists who had not completed their studies. Among them, a new musician was singled out—Liza Zoe, during most of her appearances from 1958 until 1960, played music accompanied by smaller or bigger instrumental ensembles. On the 8th of March 1958 she took part in a school concert playing towards the end of the show a Concerto by Antonio Vivaldi for the mandolin, in D Major, RV 93, transcribed for the guitar. Only students studying under Dimitri Fampas participated there and Zoe was accompanied by a string trio who took up the part of the orchestra. The first time for such a performance was now history and Zoe is registered as the first female guitar player in Greece who played a concerto with a classical guitar and an "orchestra." Soon, Zoe performed the same piece with bigger ensembles playing three times in a period of two months: initially in the concert hall "Apollon" in the island of Leukada together with the string trio which consisted of Viron Kolassis, Fotis Vlahos and Ricardo Boadella (20 April 1958), later in Athens in the concert hall of "Parnassos" with a string orchestra under the direction of Stelios Kafandaris (25 May 1958) and finally during her final examination, again in the concert hall of "Parnassos" with a string orchestra (24 June 1958.)

The next piece of music that Zoe undertook as a soloist was the Concerto in D Major, op. 99 by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. For the first time, she played in the annual concert of Fampas school, on the 3rd of April 1960, accompanied by a string orchestra under the direction of Yiannos Ioannou. In this concert another novice guitarist, Evangelos Assimakopoulos, played Vivaldi's Concerto. It should be noted that that very same night, the young guitarist Notis Mavroudis made his maiden appearance in a School concert under Fampas' teaching. This concert attracted the interest of both the audience's and that of the critics of music. The latter pointed in their reviews the musical virtues of the young learners as well as the methodical and systematic work of the teacher:

"The master and teacher of the guitar Dimitri Fampas offered us once again an excellent specimen of his music-pedagogical endeavors with the concert at his school which took place in the concert hall of "Parnassos."

Enviably—as well as exemplary we might say—work up to the smallest detail which goes beyond the typical school performance and stands at a strictly artistic level. Starting with young Notis Mavroudis who began the concert with Bach's Prelude - Allemande and finishing with Liza Zoe who performed M. Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Concerto for guitar and orchestra everything pointed to the serious work that takes place in the artistic "nursery" of D. Fampas' school...

The young guitarist Notis Mavroudis, is undoubtedly gifted with a great talent in music which under the guidance of his teacher has been developed to an enviable point. His technique, even though still developing, enables him to play with ease and confidence. We especially enjoyed Bach's Prelude...

Vaggelis Assimakopoulos and Liza Zoe play in a rather mature manner and they are on their way of artistic development. They both offered us exceptional interpretations of the musical pieces they presented."[\[3\]](#)



Parallel to the students studying the guitar the professional soloists of the time were working in full swing. Dimitri Fampas played Vivaldi's Concerto for a radio broadcast accompanied by the Small Orchestra of the National Broadcasting Institute under the direction of Alekos Kontis (25 July 1959). The recording of this performance was broadcasted numerous times by the Third Programme; more than ten broadcasts have been traced in the announcements of radio programmes which were published in the Athenian newspapers between 1959 and 1967.

It was in a radio broadcast that the first collaboration with an orchestra took place with Gerassimos Miliaressis who played Tedesco's Concerto for the first time for a Greek audience accompanied by an orchestra conducted by Viron Kolassis. The Concerto was broadcasted for the first time by the National Programme on March 17 1960 and it was repeated on the 23rd of the same month. The same Concerto was presented in the concert of the Small Orchestra of Athens under the direction of Stelios Kafantaris in the Kentrikon theatre (3 March 1963). In an account of Miliaressis himself, the astonishing impact of the sound of his guitar is recorded:

"What was characteristic of that performance was that while I was playing along with 35 orchestra instruments, that day the guitar could be discernibly heard in an astonishing way. Members of the audience who had been to other recitals, similar gatherings, even with Segovia, serious and valid music-lovers, all stated that they had never heard a guitar "sound" the way it had sounded on that day in Kentrikon Theatre. Perhaps that was so, because at that time I used "apoyando" extensively and profusely."[\[4\]](#)



In addition to the appearances of Greek guitarists in the Athenian concert halls, another fact reinforced the process of placing the instrument in greater orchestra ensembles. In September of 1961, a duet by Ida Presti and Alexander Lagoya visited Athens in order to appear in the Herodius Atticus Odeon during the Athenian Festival. It was the first time that a foreign duet of guitarists appeared in a Greek audience and in specific with compositions for two guitars and an orchestra. With the collaboration of the Berlin Chamber Orchestra and under the direction of Hans von Benda, the duet of Presti and Lagoya performed on the night of September 1st two Concertos by Vivaldi, transcribed for two guitars and a string ensemble. The dazzling dexterity of the two guitarists in combination with their remarkable artistic temperament offered to the Athenian audience a night to remember—not to mention the fact that the event took place in one of the biggest but also most difficult (as far as acoustic are concerned) concert halls in Athens.

A few days later the critic of music Minos Dounias gave an account in his newspaper *Kathimerini* of the artistic events that took place during the Athenian Festival. In his review he singled out among all the ensembles that put in an appearance the Berlin Chamber Orchestra both for its overall performance but also for the special virtues of its musicians. When he mentioned the Presti and Lagoya duet, he praised the rare way in which they executed their pieces as follows:

...two remarkable guitarists, Ida Presti and Alexander Lagoya, caused a riot of enthusiasm in the packed Odeon of Herodius Atticus presenting two Concertos by Vivaldi. I truly can not fathom anything as artistic and light and as ethereal and spiritual as this singular art and unique expertise of the two guitarists..."[5]

The Greek duet *Evangelos & Liza* started performing Baroque concertos soon after its formation. In specific, in 1964, Evangelos Assimakopoulos and Liza Zoe performed Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto in G Major, RV 532, and George Frederic Handel's Concerto Grosso, num. 21, transcribed for two guitars and a string orchestra. The Small Orchestra of Athens gave two concertos where the above mentioned opuses were performed under the direction of Mikis Theodorakis (19/01/1964 and 26/01/1964). The young guitarists had already completed their studies and they had embarked on an international career. Their technique but also their artistic virtues were stressed by critics of music such as Alexandra Lalaouni, Yiorgos Loetsakos, Foivos Anoyianakis, Ioli Boukouvala and Lily Sperer Drakou—an extract from the latter's review follows:

"The Small Orchestra of Athens opened for the new year with a most interesting programme during its recent concert in "Parnassos" with head director Mikis Theodorakis (in Concertos by Vivaldi and Handel) and Stelios Kafantaris (in Concertos of Bouxtehoute, Folkman and Tchaikovsky).

Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso with its profuse brush strokes and Handel's Concerto Grosso, num. 21 with a daring spirit and a transparent expression were reconstructed in bright colors, although the romantic fluctuations in the intensity apparent occasionally in Handel were rather foreign to his work. The greatest interest lay though in the concerto's double meaning of principle and touch / style—a collaboration and a competition between the soloists (concertino) and the "tutti."

Among the numerous Concertos by Vivaldi, the one in G Major for two guitars presented by Liza Zoe and Vaggelis Assimakopoulos had a uniqueness and that resulted due to the artistic blending of the voices of the ensemble and the soloists, the rich melodic material and the juxtaposition of the fluid and vivid external parts with the magical sound of the andante.

We have also in the past dealt with the two exceptional soloists and their art in handling their difficult musical instrument; we emphasize again that the day before last, they performed with a fluid and melodic touch filled with inspiration and rhythm especially evident in the elegiac andante."[6]



But what was the significance and impact of the above mentioned events in the artistic circles of Greece?

It is ascertained that during a rather brief period of time there had been intense activities as far as the guitar was concerned. Suddenly there had been a rapid increase in the performances of concertos for guitars and orchestra ensembles. And it is hopefully evident that these performances did not come to an abrupt end but continued making significant strides which a future research will bring to light.[7] We can assume that there had been such a high frequency of performances due to factors of competition and rivalry among the guitarists.

The rivalry among the Greek guitarists in performing concertos benefited manifold the promotion of the instrument in Greece. Firstly, it helped to improve the schooling level of the guitarists involved in this "endeavor" for artistic recognition; and that was not the case only in the field of being skillful in playing the instrument but also being widely cultivated through the experience provided by belonging to an orchestra. One of the existing shortcomings of guitarists and of all the players of instruments who do not belong to symphonic orchestras is the difficulties they encounter when greater ensembles are to collaborate.

The benefit for the guitarists did not pertain only to their technical grounding. Collaborating with smaller or bigger orchestras lead to the guitarists' coming in contact with a wide audience who preferred symphonic music to solo recitals.

So this collaboration offered the opportunity for the soloists to make their artistic virtues known and thus distinguish themselves as well as present the possibilities of the instrument itself.

Consequently, in a rather undisputable way, the upgrading of the guitar's position was sealed; starting as an accompanying instrument of folk music she gained a reputation as a solo instrument, equivalent to the rest of the so-called "classical" instruments. That was of course one of the main objectives of the guitarists of those days—upgrading the guitar to the same level enjoyed by the other instruments of "serious" music. The role of the concert soloist was thus the most convincing evidence for a case for the guitar who had assumed not only an equivalent role to the rest of the instruments but was at times the protagonist.

The evidence presented thus far advocate also the great strides made in the instrument's technique in Greece. The role of the soloist entails a high level of technical skills so as to cope with the artistic demands of the music. As far as the sound pressure level of the instrument is concerned, a technique has to be achieved and the manufacturers' specifications for the instrument should provide the necessary standard for sound level in order to enable it to juxtapose the orchestra.

All these needs had been implemented within a very short period of time. The first professional soloists in Greece as the protagonists—Gerassimos Miliaressis and Dimitri Fampas as well as their students—the technique of the instrument made great progress. Shortly after the war, two valuable elements were included which helped the instrument's technique: a new source for the making of the strings and a new manner of pinching the strings. Most of the guitars available until the fourth decade of the 20th century had steel strings and many guitarists in Greece had no idea that strings from intestines existed. The first nylon strings were manufactured in the United States in 1947^[8] and were used in Greece fairly soon—1950 onwards—and offered a new quality to the sound the instrument produced. On the other hand, appoyando or "sustained tap" were singular techniques where the fingernail was used and came to fill in the last details in the now "mechanism" of sound production of the guitar: this new sound offered stability in the tapings, distinct stress in the musical sound, joint utterances of the musical sentences, variety in the shade of the sound and upgraded the instrument to a leading factor during the process of music production.

The shortcomings in technique were probably the most inhibiting factors that prevented the Greek guitarists from performing such concertos. The guitar was, mainly known as an instrument of folk music. Up until 1945 there was not one conservatory in Greece which had included guitar classes in its curriculum. The only educational venues which had included the guitar in their curriculum were the various mandolin groups where the guitar was viewed as an accompanying instrument. Recitals for solo guitars were only a few while such events were rather amateurish. Above all the prevalent bias against the guitar's folk nature brought the guitarists' reputation to a disadvantage in regards to the other musicians.



The fact that guitar students participated in the first performances, as shown in this study, has much to suggest to be commented upon. Firstly, the talent and the abilities displayed by the artists who were in the making come to the foreground, especially at a time when playing the guitar did not offer professional security. The rapid progress in the instrument's technique is evident—what was impossible for the soloist of the previous generation is now achieved by students learning the guitar. Furthermore, the devotion shown by both students and their teachers is emphasized—not only the systematic schooling and the high standard of knowledge but also the ceaseless efforts for the preparation of concerts in the best possible conditions. Dimitri Fampas sees the concerts of his School as a good opportunity to promote the students in his charge. Consequently he made sure to provide an orchestra ensemble for the accompaniment of the Concertos in concerts, exams and whatever event it was necessary. It is not surprising then that Liza Zoe played Vivaldi's Concerto even before her teacher did.

The visit of the duet of Presti and Lagoya in Athens held a special importance for the guitarists of the time. In the packed Odeon of Herodius the Atticus, the two renowned guitarists managed to accumulate the greatest audience which had ever come forth to attend a guitar concert. In this way, they attested to the fact the guitar could attract big audiences and carve out a significant career for itself—a fact that became a strong motive for the new musicians of the times. Not to mention the fact that it became the starting point for the formation of the first Greek duet of guitarists. It is clear, based on the facts we have been looking into, that there had been indications of the bursting spread that the instrument was to undergo in Greece.

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Endnotes

- [1] George Clinton, «Segovia at 81», *Andrés Segovia / An Appreciation*, London: Musical New Services, 1978, p. 28
- [2] Matanya Ophee, «The First Guitar Concerto... and other legends», *Classical Guitar*, Gateshead, 1985, p. 19-25
- [3] V. Arkadinos [Vassilis Papadimitriou], newspaper *H Avgi*, Athens, 22.4.1960
- [4] Gerassimos Miliareisis, interview to Tassos Kolydas, Athens, 26.10.1995
- [5] Minos Dounias, newspaper *I Kathimerini*, Athens, 6.9.1961
- [6] Lili Sperer - Drakou, newspaper *Athinaiki*, Athens, 23.1.1964
- [7] Even if in the future a performance before the above mentioned events comes to light, this ascertainment, as well as the following ones, will remain valid.
- [8] Andrés Segovia, «Guitar strings before and after Albert Augustine», *Guitar Review*, New York 1952-1955, i. III/13-18, p. 145-148