

*Dr. Ronald C. Purcell, founder of the International Guitar Research Archives, wrote the following as part of an earlier series dedicated to featuring highlights of the collections in IGRA. This edited version of Volume III is provided as a supplementary guide to users of the Vahdah Olcott-Bickford Correspondence collection.*

## **Sneak-peak at the contents of: Volume III – Vahdah Olcott-Bickford Correspondence**

### **Preface**

The estate of Vahdah Olcott-Bickford (VOB), (1885-1980) contains a treasure-trove of correspondence spanning nearly a century and almost the entire globe. Musicologists, Ethnomusicologists, Humanists, Social Behaviorists, World Economists, World War Buffs, Historians, Research scholars, Graduate students and the general public will find the information contained in these letters of great and captivating interest. Here one can find letters from the famous, the soon-to-be-famous, the obscure; letters from guitarists, mandolinists, banjoists, students, critics, fans, guitar makers, editors, and publishers. Among this vast exchange of letters is found some of the solutions humankind uses to deal with hardships, catastrophes and just plain everyday living.

Guitar, unlike other musical instruments, is a universal musical instrument. It is taken to the bosom throughout the world by both trained musicians and untrained folk. We hear of success in these letters from both worlds. Some of the letters contain a search for the guitars origins by amateur musicologists. This sparks a whole new research field that started in the 1900's. The instrument as we know it today can easily be traced back to the 15th century. However, within the past 50 years of research, its origins are found in archeological sites throughout the Egyptian empire, c. 2000 BC, heading into the Greek and Roman Empires on into the Renaissance to the present day. You will read about this search in many of the letters.

The letters are presented in chronological order and begin in the 1880's and end in the late 1970's. This very large group of correspondence is the life story of Vahdah Olcott-Bickford nee Ethel Lucretia Olcott.

THE TOPICS - 19th century music prints, original manuscripts, the music of South American Indians and the music from many other countries are discussed. Information on publishers, luthiers, societies and guilds is to be found. Letters from World War I and World War II victims containing tragic stories about living through the wars and looking for loved ones, noted musicians and luthiers who have been subjected to horrible circumstances. And, discussions of performance programs from around the world with letters containing juicy tid-bits, rumor's and gossip about the artists. The amateurs love for the guitar, the cost of music and instruments, who makes the best guitar, and so on and so on. Many of the letters contain photographs, autobiographies, biographies telling the recipient, "here's what I look like, what I do, and information on the musicians I know and have studied with."

### **TOPICAL EXAMPLES**

VOB's reasons for gathering together a large collection of guitar music - "Sometime we must compare notes on the various literature of the old masters that we have for I have found the collection of this music one of my greatest joys and hobbies since I was a little girl." Excerpt from VOB to J. Millet. In one letter,

she writes: "My husband says I am a perfect 'nut' on old guitar music, - and I accept the appellation - for he is no doubt correct! I go without clothes and other things that most girls spend most of their money for, - to spend it for guitar music. I really have sacrificed a lot to obtain what I have - all through the years since I was a mere slip of a girl. But I have enjoyed it more than anything else and revel in these old works when I have time to sit down and really enjoy myself, playing them over again and again. And then, through the Lecture-Recital, etc. - I make it possible for others interested in the guitar to hear them, and thus to become better acquainted with the music of the masters of our instruments, - and that also affords me pleasure and satisfaction."

Historical topics - Many letters contain valuable information on music, manuscripts and performers as well as information on the whereabouts of a piece of music and who bought the estate of this or that guitarist. For example, the letters between J. Millet and VOB reveal the contents of Luis T. Romero's holdings given over to one of his students - Millet: VOB - "the Arrevalo manuscript I am returning that to you with thanks just the same,- I have several of his works, among being one manuscript (though not in his own handwritten mss) - of his unpublished works, willed me by a dear friend of mine who was one his star pupils and who died six years ago." [Lillian Weller].

The letters from Jose G. Torres Cofsió of Mexico speaks of the music of Octavio Yanez: "Soon I am going to have printed a guitar collection of Yanez and other Mexican guitarists - and I promise to send you one gratis. Among the solos we are going to have the following ..."

A large collection of the music and instruments of her teacher, Manuel Y. Ferrer is seen in the letters between VOB and Mrs. Lord, daughter of Ferrer. There are also the original articles by Justin Holland (a major black guitarist of the 19th century) and certain translations he made from foreign methods. From Wilfred Appleby and Philip Bone, we read about the English guitarists and composers, such as , Ernest Shand, (P. J. Bone to VOB: " .. I am sending you the concerto for guitar with piano by Shand from my collection - it was not published with orchestral acct. It will give me great pleasure if you will accept it with my sincere wishes ... ", and in other letters, a biography of Arthur Froane, Verini, the Pelzer family and numerous others.

Important composers and their manuscripts are found and discussed. From Dayton C. Miller: "I am glad to send you the old manuscript copies of the scores of music for the guitar and other instruments composed by F. De Fossa, Opus 18 and Opus 19. At first I had no idea that this manuscript is in the composer's own handwriting, but a more careful study convinces me that it is. At page 28 of the 'Trois Grands Trio' are four new pages of music with the heading: 'For the ending of my 3rd Trio, replacing the Rondo suppressed upon the advise of several who find it too long and of too slow movement.'"

The search for outstanding luthiers, innovations in musical instruments, rare and historical guitars, lutes and Baroque guitars is also contained in many letters. We read in the exchange between George Krick and VOB about the luthier, Hermann Hauser, and how to obtain one of his guitars: "It was in 1924 when I first came in contact with Herman Hauser in Munich also met Fritz Buek then the Sec. of the International Guitar Society. These two men were experimenting with Guitars. In July of that year Segovia and Llobet happened to be in Munich at the same time."

Pre-Xerox Days - If interested in a piece of music that was out-of-print, VOB would have the correspondent hand copy a piece of music. She paid them to either do this work, or mail the work(s) to her, in turn she would then copy and return the work. She wrote: "This is the list of the music returned today, which includes everything you have sent me except the Giuliani Premier Concerto (of which you told me to keep either that one or the Giuliani 3<sup>rd</sup> Concerto which I had played in Town Hall, New York some years ago having been loaned an original copy of which I had a copy made to memorize it from..) and the Giuliani Study which you also told me to keep." and - "If I only had more time I should liked to have copied the guitar solo part anyway, but 25 pages is too much for me right now and it is so expensive

to have it done by a copyist at fifty cents or more per page when a number runs into 25 pages. Some of them charge a dollar a page here for guitar music copying." Future letters talk about searching for other ways to copy, i.e., architectural blue-print.

Guitar Amateur - The serious amateur is seen in many letters taking a major role in the business of guitar activities even though they make their living doing something else. For example, when asked what instrument he would like to study, Wilfred M. Appleby, a philatelist and later the editor of the English publication, "Guitar News" responded: "I am a business man, just over 50, married, no family. My wife agreed, and asked what it should be. I said I'd always wanted to learn the Spanish guitar she thought a similar instrument might suit her, so I wrote to Miss Alice Gardiner whom we knew well, asking if she could teach me the guitar in 12 lessons & perhaps include a few tips on the ukulele (which I strummed). My wife chose the mandolin, and I now realize I should have said 12 years instead of 12 lessons for the guitar! We both had some acquaintance with music - piano, violin & vocal, & I had had some songs published. We agreed that we had no spare time, but, all the same, we would study seriously."

Appleby later becomes the Guitarists' Detective: "I have got into touch with John Shand, son of Ernest. He is on the London staff of the "Manchester Guardian", one of our leading papers, and is a music critic. It was quite a surprise for him to be told that his Father was the greatest British-born composer for the guitar! Actually he saw all too little of his father who was always 'on tour' as a comedian. But he does remember hearing his father play the guitar - and grumbling because his fingers were stiff for lack of practice! He said it sounded most beautiful, & remembered 'meditation'. His mother is still living and he has promised to try to get a photo of Ernest Shand & some more information from her. So I can only hope and wait. I'll let you know if anything comes. Miss Phyllis Shand (daughter of Ernest) is an actress in the Birmingham Repertory Company. John Shand and Arthur Froane both live in Finchley, London, so I have put them in touch with each other."

"Classical" Guitar - VOB's dedication towards keeping the guitar "Classical" is seen in these letters along with stickers claiming "Keep the Guitar Classical" which were attached to envelopes. As the times change, she becomes more unforgiving as to her position on keeping the guitar classical. Witness the letters through the First World War, Depression and the Second World War: "In regard to guitar interests in our country I am unable to submit a favorable report,- for music is at a standstill in all lines except the terrible jazz! The hard times have stopped so many pupils from continuing their lessons and there are no engagements scarcely anywhere. The awful system of playing the guitar with a pick has gained great headway in our country,- due to the popularity of jazz bands and that of course hurts legitimate playing. However, we still keep working for our ideals."

Guitar Dictionary, Library or Encyclopedia Project - VOB's pursuit is stimulated by her involvement with Philip J. Bone, the publications of Joseph Zuth, Ricardo Munoz, Fritz Buek, Domingo Prat, and others. Note how she continues to remind friends of her intentions. She also wrote to the major libraries regarding her pursuit to develop a central guitar library: "I would be fine if you could get Mr. Anderson of the New York Public Library to really make a specialty of guitar music to the end that it would tend to build up an appreciation of it,- at least in that city. I have always had in mind from the very inception of The American Guitar Society in 1923, - the building up of a Society Library and would be accessible to all our resident members, - and later, - perhaps, - if possible and feasible,- make some sort of arrangement so that it would also be available to our other non-resident members, or Members-At-Large. Then everyone interested in the guitar anywhere in the world would know about it and where to obtain the fine works that I hoped, and still continue to hope,- such a Library could possess. Of course the greatest drawback is the lack of sufficient funds for such an undertaking and a place for housing it. etc. However, I could have a case made for it to keep in our home, which is the Headquarters of the Society and where the meetings are held. Well, we will see what time will bring forth in this regard." As well, VOB carried on correspondence with Carlton Sprague Smith of the Library of Congress on these matters.

VOB the performer and record producer - We read of VOB's performances throughout the U.S. as exemplified in this example when discussing Giuliani's Concerto: "and though which I was enabled to give the first American performance of the work with a fine String Quartet at Town Hall New York City on May, 1922 to a crowded house,..."

And, in the recording field, a letter directed to ZarVah Art Co., New York: "We are very glad that you plan upon having some new records pressed ..." Bridgeport Die and Machine Co., Connecticut, was the manufacturer of the first and second group of recordings, in the years, 1919, through the beginning of 1923.

Noted personalities and respondents number in the thousands: - A few examples: Albert Bellson, Heinrich Albert, William Foden, Geo. Krick, Domingo Pratt, Philip J. Bone, Charles Frederick Elzear Fiset, Julian Bream, Andres Segovia, Pete Seeger, Fred van Eps, A. A. Farland, etc. From Heinrich Albert, 1936: "conditions are very bad for the guitar here in Germany. People in general are not willing to devote even a little time to the serious study of an instrument, more especially the [?sympathetic] guitar, which is not an easy instrument, by any means. Everything must be done quickly and without much effort and that goes for the guitar as well as other things." "For this reason the guitar with us has a great scarcity of good players. This may be laid partly to the terrible war, partly to inflation and certainly partly to the advent of radio."

VOB's reputation as a teacher and performer reached distinguished families on the East Coast and later on, the West Coast. The Vanderbilt's, Baruch's and Shaw's are but one small sampling whom sought her expertise. She lived and traveled with these families, entertaining and teaching. From Cornelia Vanderbilt: "We will be in N.Y, Tue 6, 7, 8, of October [1920] & we {mother} would like to have some much needed lessons - can you come to us early those three mornings?..." From Renee Baruch: "Yes, we expect to go abroad this summer. I never take my guitar because it's too much to lug around" ... "Mrs. George Vanderbilt married Senator Peter Gary. I've never seen him and I haven't seen her in ages ..."

Appleby on Julian Bream: "A word about our boy guitarist 'Alex Julian' as he will be called. There are his Christian names. The surname is Bream. His father, Henry George Bream, is a talented commercial artist & decided to take up the study of the Spanish Guitar through reading my letter in B.M.G. about my visit to Morton Lawrence when he was at Brecon. Alex Julian showed much aptitude for music & the guitar that his father has sent him to one of the best known Music Colleges in London. Dr. Perott is giving him special instruction on the guitar. It is planned for him to give his first recital in October [1946]. Special programmes are being prepared, & important people will be invited (Radio &c.)."

Musical life in various cities - Many of the letters also discuss musical life in various parts of the U.S. and in particular, West Coast and East Coast. Discussions range from performance halls, musical instruments, luthiers, and music retailers and their activities. For example, a correspondent from Ohio, c. 1920, tells VOB about activities in her own city, Los Angeles: "The headquarters of the club is at the Baxter-Northup Company's store, 339 South Hill Street (the company is now in Sherman Oaks). Mr. Baxter is an enthusiastic flutist and in a way the leader of the club. The president, however, is Mr. C. G. Cambern who is also located at the Baxter-Northup store. I shall mention your name in writing to Mr. Baxter." In earlier letters she writes of her local concerts in Southern California now contained in a scrapbook along with newspaper clippings and reveals the musical life in Los Angeles and the surrounding valleys.

Letters from composers: Both Vahdah and her husband wrote and received letters from Percy Grainger, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, William Grant Still, Charles Haubiel, Virgil Thompson and numerous composers from Europe. From Percy Grainger: ... "My only published thing for guitar solo is 'Willow,

Willow,' but later on I shall be publishing a lot of things in which guitars and mandolins are made use of. What a genius Cyril Scott is and what a dear creature!"

Tragedies: in a letter from P. J. Bone to VOB about the earthquake in Japan, 1923: "I think I told you I sent all I had to Japan a year or two ago and have heard since that it was all destroyed in the earthquake. With family and friends, the Long Beach, California, earthquake and the cold weather spells throughout certain parts of the U.S. and Europe are discussed. The aftermath of WWI and WWII is graphically written out in some letters and VOB's inquiries and search for certain people with which she had been corresponding and her involvement in donating food and gift packages to certain countries. For example: "During Augusta's sickness we were protected by the Americans. I was an interpreter and got sufficient food. Thousands were killed by the Czechs who robbed all the houses. It was a terrible time. Four times I lost my shelter our few belongings hidden in the baby's cradle were robbed. Augusta suffered terribly. Towards the end of the year the first news from home reached us. Faithful Czech pupils of mine communicated with us and one even came to see us. Our beautiful home was completely robbed out. All the papers, books pictures had been thrown on the street. The tomb of the ancestors was destroyed. The dear old great grand aunts who were holding the family treasures had been killed and everything robbed. My three dear sisters had perished on the road after having been driven with 170 thousand other people from their houses. Two brothers had been slain. One was forced to bury the perished on the road. His estate was burned his family driven away. Nearly all our older friends perished."

Who are they? - Certain acquaintances demonstrate a keen knowledge regarding guitar activities throughout the world. For example, letters from John W. Rodgers: who was or is he? His business allowed him to travel to many countries. He knew Pujol, Fortea, Segovia, Llobet, et al., and reveals his alertness on recordings, performers, luthiers and new and old publications. An excerpt from one of his lengthy letters: "Another excellent recording is the Columbia (imported) R.S. 5023 Preludio Espana (Albeniz). Played by Juan Parras del Moral, a fellow townsman of Segovia (Jaen), and who is supposed to have studied with him. The correct title of the music is "Asturias, leyenda" and is from one of the suites of Albeniz. Segovia arranged it under the title "Leyenda": Sinopoli under the title "Preludio Espanol" and Garcia Fortea, under the title, "Prelude". \*Cantos de España, No. I."

Exchange Rates - Changes in monetary rates between the U.s. and countries like Germany yield dollar realities such as in the following example from Franz Sprenzinger: "I beg you kindly to keep in mind that the raise for my notes (music/ of 50%) on the old prices don't harmonize with the raise of the Dollar since that time. The Dollar is today selling at 260 Marks."

Guitar Methods - Before her method was published (1923), VOB used the Justin Holland "Complete Guitar Method" with her students. An excerpt from one of her students: "I wish I had my old Holland's instructor with all your finger markings in it." wrote Edna Crumpton.

Music Publishers' Invoices & Collection Purchases - I have included some invoices and receipts to demonstrate VOB's penchant for ordering music and there are literally hundreds which have not been included. Almost all list the music she is buying. One can follow the letters wherein she is being offered or searching for a major collection of guitar prints and/or manuscripts. For example, Millet wrote: "It will interest you to know that Romero left his guitars and music to me. It was a very sad task to tell him that he could not live. I was with him almost daily for a long time and arranged with a friendly doctor to take him to his country home the summer before Romero died." Following-up through VOB's interest in music, Millet later wrote: "Tomorrow I start the job of looking through Romero's big pile of music. There is so much of it that it may take a long time. I took one apart of the contents of one shelf in the case where I have kept them - waiting when the pressure of business & this state of health would give me the time - and found a large number of compositions by Sor (evidently reprints made in Germany) and a lot of transcriptions by Mertz. That is all I can tell you now but I will write again when I have more to say."

Astrology - one of VOB's serious ventures was the investigation of the occult sciences. Her studies began in New York with the famous Evangeline Adams who gave her the Astrological name of "Vahdah". She developed Astrological charts for friends and was capable of reading Tarot Cards. Some letters discuss her participation as well as her ability at reading into the future especially for friends and students. These letters will appear in a future volume. In this present volume many letters contain references to this science. One of her relatives was Henry Steel Olcott, who was the President- [co]founder of the Theosophical Society.

VOB's responses - VOB did not begin to type her letters with carbons until the end of the 1920's. Many times VOB is addressed as Mr. This is due to her given astrological first name, "Vahdah," causing some confusion at the other end. Final signature: VOB never signed her carbon copies.

There are letters from certain friends that cover anywhere from 60 to one hundred years. Examples are: Philip J. Bone and Charles Frederick Elzear Fiset. This includes the letters between Fiset and J. M. Sheppard which were given to VOB by Fiset after Sheppard's death.

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