
Washington Guitar Society

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President's Soap Box WGS Past Present and Future

Dear Washington Guitar Community,

Elections for the new president and vice president of the Washington Guitar Society will take place on Saturday, September 13 at 1 pm at the Washington Conservatory of Music, 5144 Massachusetts Ave., Bethesda, MD. This will precede my stepping down recital "*Kevin Vigil and Friends*", at 2 pm - a performance that I am dedicating to the WGS. Please make plans to attend as this will be a pivotal step for the future of the Washington Guitar Society.

As I will be stepping down soon, I thought it might be an appropriate time to review something of the past history of the classical guitar in the Washington, D.C. area. Then, following a survey of the present, we may be in a better situation to envision how to go about assuring an active, vital future for our instrument in our community.

Given my relatively recent arrival on the scene, I asked Larry Snitzler, who first began studying with Sophocles Papas in 1960, to bring us up to the present.

The Past

written by Larry Snitzler

Washington, D. C. began developing into a center of guitar activity in 1922, when **Sophocles Papas** founded the Guitar Shop (the same business currently run by Steve Spellman at 1216 Connecticut Ave., NW.) Mr. Papas immigrated to New York City from the Middle East just as World War I broke out. So it was that he spent the first few years in this country assembling machine guns for the war effort. Following the war, however, he was once again able to direct his manual dexterity toward more peaceful pursuits and resumed his musical activities in the New York area, where he remained for two or three years, before moving south to the nation's capital. Once arrived here, he began to play extensively around the Washington area as a soloist, and in chamber music ensembles, and even directed a fretted instrument orchestra for a number of years. (A photograph of this orchestra with Mr. Papas at the head was displayed in the Hall of Musical Instruments at the Smithsonian Institution for many years.) Papas gained in popularity and stature when he developed his own radio program where he played the classical guitar, along with other instruments, every week

for many years. He also founded **Columbia Music Company**, a publishing enterprise which developed a wide-ranging catalog of popular teaching pieces along with more advanced works from the concert repertoire. In addition to this, Mr. Papas wrote regularly about the classical guitar for highly respected music journals which were distributed throughout the United States. He also knew how to cultivate acquaintances - and generate students! - among the members of the diplomatic and political circles of Washington, D.C. He became a respected musical figure in town and was regularly mentioned in, or the subject of, many newspaper articles throughout the years. Finally, after Sophocles Papas and Andrés Segovia met following the Spanish Maestro's New York debut in 1928, Segovia would regularly refer students to "Mr. Papas, of Washington, D. C."

The first incarnation of the Washington Guitar Society was as **The Segovia Society**, which saw the light of day toward the late 1930s. Papas and several other admirers of Segovia's artistry would get together regularly to play the classical guitar for each other and listen to recordings of the Spanish Master. Segovia had not, as yet, played in Washington. When he finally did come for his debut here, he asked that the name of the society be changed to something that would promote the classical guitar as an instrument, rather than his own name and career alone.

At the end of World War II, the GI Bill set loose a number of young people in search of an education and with some money in their pockets to pay for it. Columbia Music expanded so as to be able to offer accredited courses in music theory, history and guitar. All of this was in the late 1940s, long before any university in the United States would have considered offering courses in the classical guitar. During this time the now renamed **Washington Guitar Society** continued its regular meetings at the Guitar Shop or, just as often, at some local restaurant where the playing, the wining and dining, the singing and the schmoozing would go on till the late hours of the evening, (or the early hours of the morning)! There are still pictures from those gatherings which make very clear why the city was the place to live, work and love in those days.

During the 1950s a number of people whose names will still be known to Washington area guitarists came to study with Sophocles Papas. Among them: **Charlie Byrd, Bill Harris, Alvino Rey, Regis Ferruzza, John Marlow and Aaron Shearer.**
