

## **An Alternative History of Guitar Playing: No-Nail Players in the Twentieth Century**

When Segovia was asked about playing guitar without nails, he bluntly replied, ‘It is absolutely stupid. You reduce the volume of the guitar and the difference of timbre and colour.’ Although there were often-heated debates about the subject in the first half of the twentieth century, Segovia’s view ultimately became dominant. The contributions of the many successful no-nail concert guitarists have therefore been neglected.

Most no-nail players – though certainly not all – descended from Francisco Tárrega, following his decision at the turn of the century to cut off his nails. His ‘conversion’ should be understood neither as a return to, nor a continuation of, an older way of playing, but rather as a new approach. Indeed, no-nail guitarists usually played modern repertoire on modern instruments and strings. They were performing in major concert halls, with orchestras, and on radio and television.

Their success is curiously reflected in the 1954 entry for Emilio Pujol in the Grove Dictionary, which now reads like an alternative history. The author wrote that the Pujol school’s preference for no-nail playing

makes the tone much more beautiful and increases the expressiveness of the instrument. Thanks to Pujol’s teaching, the quality of tone-production on the guitar, considered as a concert instrument for classical music, has been considerably improved.

The story of no-nail players in the twentieth century is remarkable and surprising. It deserves, finally, to be told.

**Website:** [nonailguitar.com](http://nonailguitar.com)

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