

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

When Segovia was asked in 1972 about Tárrega's decision to play without nails, he bluntly replied, 'It is absolutely stupid. You reduce the volume of the guitar and the difference of timbre and colour.' Despite the long tradition of no-nail playing, this became the dominant view. The role of twentieth century no-nail guitarists has therefore been neglected.

Indeed, Tárrega's 'conversion' remains strangely overlooked in histories of the guitar, yet it was an unprecedented act that would influence generations of guitarists. Moreover, the Tárrega school were not the only no-nail guitarists in the century; there were others continuing earlier traditions as well as those who were following an idiosyncratic path.

Debates raged about the subject, including in the second half of the century. Although the number of no-nail players was declining, there were still many well into the 1960s and 70s. The best 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.

Biography

Steven Watson is a doctoral researcher at the International Guitar Research Centre (University of Surrey) and a member of the Cambridge Cohort of Guitar Research. He also has a master's degree in music from King's College London, and is an active performer, composer, writer and teacher.