

LECTURE

FRIDAY, JAN 30, 14.00

STEVEN WATSON

'Oh! The Number of Fools is Infinite!': The Nail Question in the Nineteenth Century

Antonio Abreu compared playing without nails to putting oil or tallow on a violin bow – 'Oh! infinitus est numerus stultorum!' he complained.

On the other hand, Fernando Sor wrote that 'never in my life have I heard a guitarist whose playing was supportable if he played with nails'. Despite the strong feelings it could evoke, the nail question is a somewhat elusive aspect of historical guitar technique. Approximately half the surviving methods do not even mention nails, and, among those that do, relatively few dedicate more than a sentence to the subject. One is left wondering not only who used which technique (or even both), but, more generally, if the nail question was as important to players as we might today assume. Yet while there are considerable evidential gaps and uncertainties – sometimes one cannot even be sure that guitarists practised what they preached – the sheer number and breadth of relevant sources means that a curious overall picture nevertheless emerges.



© Steven Watson

Steven Watson is a PhD student at the International Guitar Research Centre (University of Surrey), where he is researching the history of playing guitar without nails, supervised by Stephen Goss. He also has a master's degree in music from King's College London, and is an active performer, composer, writer and teacher.