Memories of My Teachers

By John F. Steiner

When I was eleven my father came to me. “I have always wanted to play the guitar,” he said. “I think it would be good if you learned to play too.” Soon we went to Music City on Sunset and Vine in Hollywood, where we bought identical Goya guitars and left with the name of a teacher—Vahdah Olcott Bickford. We called her and she accepted us as pupils.

This was the start of my engagement with the guitar. My father would soon end his lessons due to career demands, but I was encouraged to continue. His decision would one day be mine, but not before I had the good fortune to study with Mrs. Bickford and two other remarkable teachers—Luis Elorriaga and Vicente Gomez. In recounting my experiences with them, I hope to illuminate their singular natures. I begin with Mrs. Bickford.

Vahdah Olcott-Bickford (1885-1980)

On the appointed day, March 3, 1956, as my father and I drove the steep, winding street to her Hollywood Hills home, we were innocent of the person we would meet, the preeminent lady of the American guitar, a child prodigy who had ascended to greatness as a concert artist, thrived in the society of New York City musicians, set new standards for guitarists, and founded the American Guitar Society. We would learn.

Mrs. Bickford received us warmly and, one at a time, we began our studies in her bright, open music room. She was 70 when I, an absolute blank slate, became her 11-year-old pupil.

That day, she gave each of us the first book of her guitar method.1 She introduced me to the open strings and wrote, “Every good boy deserves fudge” at the top of a page. It was a good beginning.

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1 Vahdah Olcott-Bickford, The Vahdah Olcott-Bickford Guitar Method (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1921). Her method fills two volumes. The second, is Vahdah Olcott-Bickford, Advanced Course for the Guitar (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1924). Both are 120 pages.
Lessons in the music room were one hour. Mrs. Bickford introduced each new exercise or song by penciling the date in the left margin. We then worked through it. She was calm and gentle, always encouraging, though in her way somewhat firm. She sat on my right and used a red knitting needle to direct errant fingers. Then, when the piece was read, she would write in the margin the number of times I was to practice it daily. It might be eight times the first week, then four the next, and so forth, depending on progress. When it was finally well played, she pasted a small gold star on the page. She had standards. Not every piece got a star.\(^2\) To this day, looking through the two volumes of her method, I can see my exact progress those many years ago.

Each week, while my father took his lesson, I had an hour waiting in the living room. To me it was an eccentric space. Whatever the room once was, it had become a disordered library. Books were stacked on every surface. Subjects and categories mixed in a grand chaos—literature, fiction, history, biography, and, of course, music. There was one exception.

On a table by the big stuffed chair where I waited sat piles of books, some with lurid, tabloid-like covers, about flying saucers, UFOs, and alien visitors. These seeming misfits in an otherwise cultured home were the realm of Zarh, Mrs. Bickford’s husband, who had great curiosity about visitors from the cosmos. I soon looked forward to quiet hours in this magical space filled with adventures on the written page.

Now and then, Zarh would enter the room and greet me. He was a tall, thin, quiet man, dignified, imposing, yet friendly in his reserved way. He was himself a noted musician, composer and performer, master of many instruments, and author of methods for

\(^2\) My last gold star came in September 1958. Apparently, extrinsic reward was no longer needed.
both mandolin and banjo. He and Mrs. Bickford were an extraordinary couple living parallel lives as eminent musicians. To me he was a benevolent figure. Occasionally, with Mrs. Bickford’s encouragement, he would sit at the piano or produce a mandolin and play a duet with me. I still recall the absolute certainty with which he played.

No characterization of Mrs. Bickford and her teaching is complete without comment on her comprehensive method, which is revealing of her nature. When only 21 she was quoted in a musician’s magazine as saying it was her ambition to raise “the guitar again to the lofty plane it occupied in the days of the old masters.” This became a lifetime goal, her method books being important steps toward it.

In the forward to the first book, written in her mid-30s, she explained that although the methods of old masters like Sor, Carulli, Aguado, and Carcassi were “splendid,” there was an unmet need for a “progressive” approach with “modern, original material,” an approach that recognized new styles of guitar playing. She intended to meet this need. She would command the guitar community by authoritatively defining the realm, leaping the margins of tradition, and standing on the shoulders of past greats to create a better way. Indeed! She was strong-willed.

The method is systematic, insists on thorough technical knowledge, disciplines practice, and seeks to motivate through inspiration. Along with text, exercises, and short compositions, both books are filled with thoughtful quotations from great musicians and other notables. They offer practical advice, “Practice scales every day of your life,” Wm. Sherwood; poetic insights, “Every difficulty slurred over will be a ghost to disturb your repose later on,” Chopin; motivation, “He can who believes he can,” Anonymous; and wisdom, “Think more of your progress than of the opinion of others,” Mendelssohn.

In their entirety, the method books clearly reflect Mrs. Bickford’s values, which are order, discipline, hard work, perseverance, courage, aspiration, and the importance of music in life. In accord with these values, my education was thorough. We went through each

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4 “Ethel Lucretia Olcott,” *The Cadenza*, XIII, no. 2, October 1906, 30. The article presents her as already “a talented and accomplished artist.”

book in precise order, step-by-step, skipping nothing, moving on only when the scale, exercise, or short work was well played. And in the process, her “pupil,” as she would refer to me, learned the rules and absorbed the higher virtues as well. No stronger foundation ever was laid.

The American Guitar Society

Being Mrs. Bickford’s pupil meant playing for the American Guitar Society. From time to time, she wrote “memorize” in the margin of a piece and that meant it would be performed.
My first appearance before the group came at age 12. The April 1957 meeting was dedicated to ancient music and I recall it well. I played two medieval dances. As I played, I watched the audience, looking over the room with curiosity, noting reactions. Mostly, there were smiling faces, though Mrs. Bickford’s smile seemed a bit strained. Not that night, but at my next lesson, she advised me not to stare at the audience. Henceforth, I complied.

On another evening, I faltered in the middle of a piece, could not recover, paused, and finally said, “I can’t remember.” From the side of the room I heard Mrs. Bickford say “B flat” in a soft voice. It was as if clouds had parted and the heavens emitted a ray of light. I resumed.

In the 1950s, the group most often met in the homes of members and supporters. Before each meeting Mrs. Bickford sent notices of dates, times, and addresses on postcards she typed herself. Proper attire was a jacket and tie for men, an evening dress for women.

As in her teaching, Mrs. Bickford brought structure and discipline to the meetings. She and Zarh, who was president of the group for many years, sought to pass on their knowledge of music history and their vision of appropriate repertoire. In a way, the meetings were a monthly lesson. Each had a theme—the music of nature, folk songs and dances, nineteenth century composers, contemporary composers—and the program strictly adhered to it.

An example is the April 1958 meeting when the group met at the South Pasadena home of Samuel Mardigian, a prominent importer. The evening was a tribute to the composer Anton Diabelli on the 100th anniversary of his death. Every piece would be one of his

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6 It was the “Tenth Program of Ancient Music,” April 27, 1957, at a residence on Lindbrook Drive in West Los Angeles.
7 These were “Tordion” by Pierre Attaignant (1529) and “Abtanz (Abbot’s Dance)” by Pierre Phalese (1571).
8 This was the “All-Diabelli Program in Tribute to Anton Diabelli (1781-1858),” April 26, 1958.
compositions. At the start, Mrs. Bickford made remarks about Diabelli’s life and works. I led off the program with two numbers, “Landlers, Opus 121,” “No. 1” and “No. 2.” Ron Purcell played “No. 4” and “No. 8.” Joel Nava and several others performed more of his works.

But this was not yet a full evening and so, as was their custom, the Bickfords filled out the program. She performed two more Diabelli pieces, then she and Zarh played two piano-guitar duets and a mandolin-guitar duet. Finally, they were joined by others to play a trio for two terz and one regular guitar and a trio for flute, viola, and guitar. It was typical of them to appear multiple times. And on this night the incomparable Zarh played five instruments—guitar, terz guitar, viola, piano, and, in a duet with Marty Trent, mandolin.

Perhaps due to thematic discipline the Bickfords imposed, or to the relaxed atmosphere of meeting in a home, playing rarely ended with the formal program. Coffee and pastries appeared and someone, often someone not on the program that night, would be prevailed upon to play. Others would gather around to listen. Once, at the end of the evening, Pepe and Angel Romero engaged in a duel of falsettas. First Angel would play, then Pepe would play something faster and more complicated. This was repeated until Angel, with good-natured resignation, gave in. We all applauded the exceptional moment.

LUIS ELORRIAGA (1888-1975)

Luis Elorriaga was known as “the Professor,” and addressed in conversation as simply “Professor.” The origin of this title is elusive, but dates back at least to 1939 when the Society page of the Los Angeles Times noted that “Prof. Luis Elorriaga” played for a salon at the rancho of a wealthy socialite. Whether official or not, this title, used as a name, reflected his stature in the guitar community.

Biographical details of his life as a performer and composer are obscured by time, but glimpses of distinction are visible. In 1928, he recorded guitar solos of his compositions as 78-rpm singles for Okeh Records, a label owned by Columbia Records. In the 1930s, the Los Angeles Times reported him performing at society functions

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10 These recordings are “Danza Rosa” (W400578), “Hora Azul” (W400579), “Petenera” (W400580), and “Rosario” (W400581), all recorded on April 10, 1928. They are available for online listening in the Discography of American Historical Recordings in the UC Santa Barbara Library.
and in theaters. He played at an event for pioneering southern California Spanish families, accompanied a “prominent Spanish tenor,” and played “classical numbers” at an evening party in the Los Feliz home of a renowned physician. In 1939, he played while a wealthy patron of music and the arts did Spanish and Mexican dances for an audience of the Hollywood elite—famous actors, directors, choreographers, and the bankers who funded their films.

In the early 1940s, he was living and teaching in Mexico. One of his students was Elena Wolfskill, great-granddaughter of William Wolfskill, a business tycoon and cofounder of the City of Los Angeles. In an interview, she spoke of her guitar teacher, Luis Elorriaga of Mexico City, with whom she collaborated in composing music for a show on early California folk music. By the late 1940s, he was back in Los Angeles, teaching at the California Academy of Music. It was there that Al Viola, the future jazz great, took his first guitar lessons, studying classical guitar with the Professor.

The Professor was 72 when I came to him in the summer of 1960. He lived in a modest two-story stucco apartment building at 1760 Argyle Avenue in Hollywood, just a block from the Capitol Records building. A close friend, Carolina Ribidoux, had an upstairs apartment. She also was a guitarist and played at American Guitar Society meetings. Carolina freely came and went from the Professor’s apartment and might drop in on a lesson in progress.

In appearance, he was imposing, with a rotund body and large head. Yet he was gentle in spirit, jovial, and avuncular in his approach to a high school boy, offering not just music lessons but also stories of past romances and worldly advice.

As a teacher, he was not at all a disciplinarian. He did not emphasize music theory with its rules and restraints. He gave a piece over to you, not without advice and correction, but with a dispensation to interpret it boldly, lightly, or even unconventionally. What mattered was to be expressive.

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14 Jim Carlton, Conversations with Great Jazz and Studio Guitarists (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2009), 30.
The first six weeks of my studies were filled with basic instruction on scales, tremolo, arpeggios, time signatures, and hand position, using his own written exercises. Then we moved on to pieces. The Professor taught the modern Spanish guitar repertoire, being especially fond of Albeniz, Tarrega, Torroba, and Villa-Lobos. He also gave me his arrangements of traditional Mexican folk themes and some of his own compositions, often sentimental, haunting melodies. He had great facility and when he played, he took command of the guitar, displaying a raw kinetic energy, playing almost as if attacking the instrument, creating powerful rhythms, putting on a memorable performance.

His vision was poor and he wore thick, heavy glasses. Using a small booklet lined for music, he recorded each lesson with bold script from a broad-tipped fountain pen. With his head just inches from the page, he wrote the date and noted two or three pieces of the day for emphasis in the week’s practice.

The Professor and the luthier Candelario “Candelas” Delgado were close friends and he had several Candelas guitars. He passed one of them on to me. An inscription inside reads, “Construí esta guitarra especialmente a mi estimado amigo, Luis Elorriaga,” I still have it.
In the winter of 1974, I first met Vicente Gomez in a small West
Los Angeles office building. He taught in a plain, windowless
room furnished simply with two chairs, a music stand, and a small
desk on which sat a phone. He greeted me cheerfully.

I introduced myself and told him how moving it was that when
I was a small child my parents played one of his albums to put me
to sleep. Now, years later, in a remarkable turn of fortune, I would
study with him. I do not recall his exact words, but he gave only a
perfunctory response, then asked about my history with the guitar
and told me to play something for him. Perhaps he did not think of
the album as sleep inducing. But I had gained an important insight.
He was direct and utterly task oriented. There was no room for in-
gratiation or small talk.

I played “Leyenda,” or at least started, but he soon stopped me,
having taken my measure. Then we began the work, which con-
sisted of correcting unsound habits, practicing fundamentals, and
learning new pieces.

He emphasized basic technique. In that first lesson, he gave me
a set of nine “Every Day Exercises,” written in his own hand. They
consisted of scales, arpeggios, rasgueados, tambor, harmonics, and
a slightly diabolical progressive ladder of atonal notes he called dis-
armingly a “Left and Right Hand Exercise.” Scales were to be prac-
ticed with both plucking and hammer strokes using alternate right-
hand fingerings, first i and m, then i and a, then m and a.

At the top of these exercises, he wrote, “POSITION (most im-
portant).” Like John Wooden, who taught his basketball players
how to put on their shoes and socks, Mr. Gomez believed in basics.
He once said that were he again to prepare for concerts he would
start by playing nothing but scales all day for two weeks.

Though affable, he was a formidable perfectionist. No error or
lapse in technique was ever overlooked. He was polite and gentle,
never stern or cold, reassuring and never a tyrant, but consistently
serious and unwavering. Doubtless this was the remnant of a fierce
achievement drive in the child prodigy who rose from his father’s
Madrid tavern to worldwide fame.

Lessons were important events. One day I had a bad cold and
called beforehand, asking if he would prefer I not come and expose
him to it. No fraction of time preceded his answer. “Come,” he said.
I should have known. Now and then, the phone on the desk would

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15 The street address was 8015 Beverly Boulevard.
16 This must have been Vicente Gomez, *Guitar Recital*, Decca Records,
DC8017, LP (1952).
ring. His response was always the same. He acknowledged the caller’s greeting and abruptly ended the call, saying, “I am giving a lesson.”

No written notes ended the hour. To suggest a piece be played two, four, or six times a day was beside the point. His unspoken instruction was to do what you were capable of by the next week. The goal was constant improvement.

He introduced me to classical music from Bach to Schubert as well as newer pieces for the Spanish guitar. I learned many of his compositions, with their flamenco rhythms and beautiful Andalusian melodies. I could play “Cantina” and pretend Tyrone Power and Ava Gardner were sitting in front of me, as with him in the film The Sun Also Rises. Only rarely would he take the guitar in hand. However, I recall a moment one day when his fingers danced like lightning on the fingerboard.

A portrait of Vicente Gomez.

Mr. Gomez wanted his students to give recitals. These were not small, intimate gatherings. They were a full evening’s program for a large and knowledgeable audience. I was a young assistant professor. It was increasingly difficult to find the necessary hours of practice to meet his expectations. The prospect of a recital only amplified the conflict. And he was persistent.
Around this time, he left for an extended stay in Europe and the break released me from his weekly discipline. It led me to the decision my father made years earlier. Mr. Gomez had, unknowingly, unintentionally, but inevitably, forced a choice. Yet, this was not bad. It was the right decision. And though I left his tutelage, he retained his influence. His example of dedication and mastery was inspiring and I held to it throughout my academic career. I recurrently thought of him. He never knew. I never told him, such are the lapses of youth.

It is for others to assess Mr. Gomez’s legacy. In Graham Wade’s history of the classical guitar, he is “not really a classical player being more interested in flamenco” and is given only “a niche in twentieth century guitar history.”17 Jack Buckingham, after hearing Gomez play in a concert, wrote he was “in my opinion the world’s greatest” guitarist.18 To me, he was simply magnificent.

**Coda**

This concludes the story of my journey in the world of the classical guitar. It was my good fortune to study with each of these distinguished musicians and I write of them with great respect. It has been an honor not only to know them, but also to have this opportunity to share my experiences with others.

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