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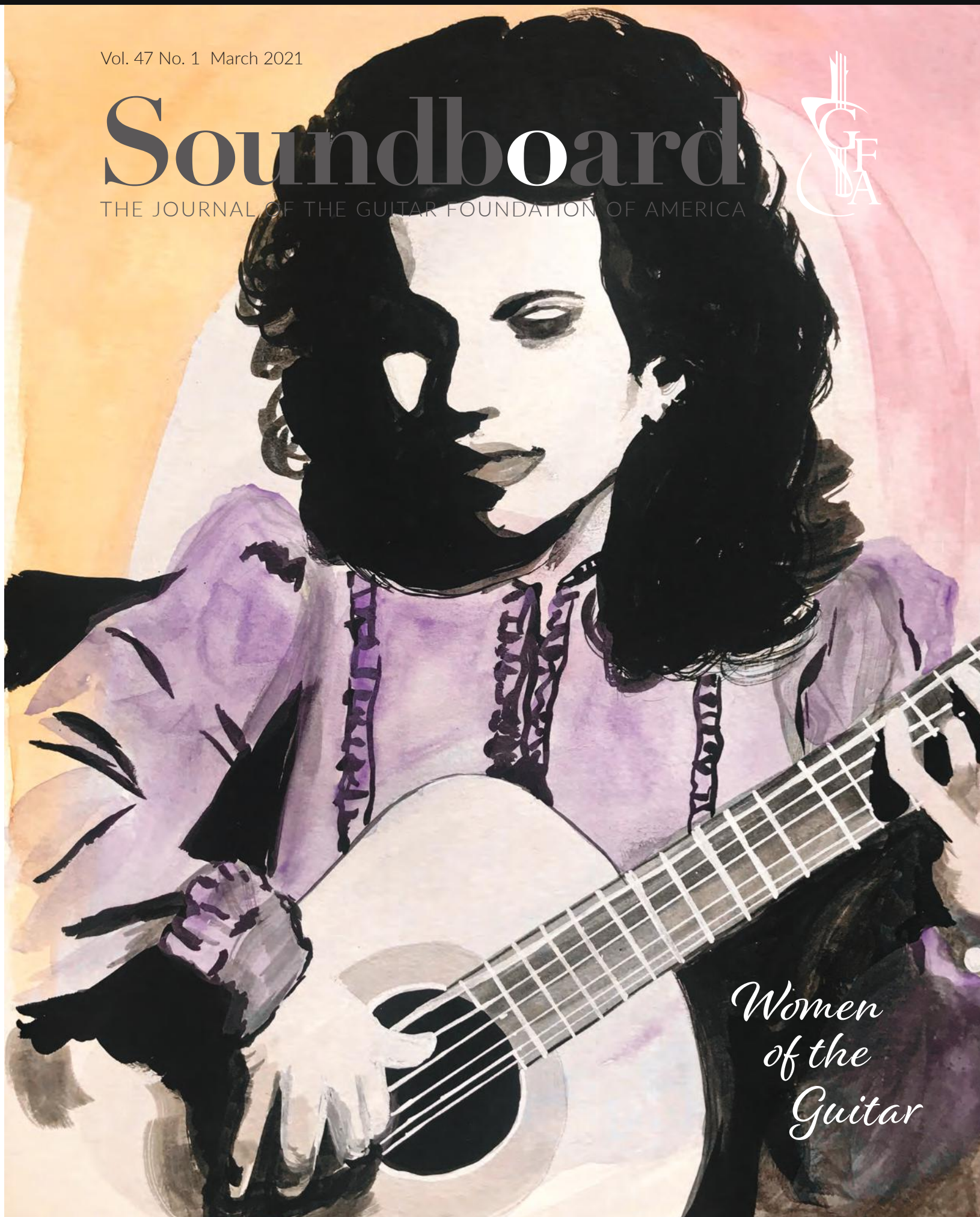

Women of the Guitar

BRAZILIAN WOMEN GUITARISTS IN THE JAZZ AGE

By Marcia Taborda

As a progressive city, Rio de Janeiro attracted the attention of intellectuals and artists, making it a receptive space for the changes demanded by modern society. The capital hosted the music industry, radio, and cinema, and began to dictate the behavior, values, and lifestyle that changed the nation's cultural awareness. That is how, at the end of the 1920s, a novelty from the *carioca* guitar scene echoed in the main Brazilian cities: young ladies from society dedicated themselves to the guitar, publicly performing a folksong repertoire.

They played guitar, flashed their legs, and kept fit as a result of sports and gymnastics that began to be disseminated. The newspapers of the period showed the achievements of modern women such as, for instance, Miss Gertrude Ederle, the world's most agile swimmer. She was the first woman to swim across the English Channel, become an Olympic champion, and then a "record woman" in several swimming distances and events. The same Miss Ederle also proved to be an acclaimed huntress, credited as the first person to shoot fauna from wild beasts to ducks on the banks of the Potomac River.[1]

I. *Cultura carioca*

Brazilian women from the 1920s were snobbish. They danced the tango but started practicing shimmy, listening to jazz bands, and embracing the foxtrot. They watched *Let it Rain* with Shirley Mason; *Why Women Love* with Blanche Sweet; and *The Apache* with Mona Maris, an English film announced as a French production, which included a segment with the Dolly Sisters and Josephine Baker dancing the Charleston.

Renowned Brazilian writer Lima Barreto, in his story *Bailes suburbanos* (Suburban Balls), published in *Gazeta de Notícias*, portrayed the sociocultural changes imposed by "bourgeoisification" of Rio's suburb. He, the protagonist, had just woken up from a poor night's sleep due to a ball in a nearby house. As he had breakfast:

> I asked my sister, moved by the monotonous music of the neighborhood dance, if nowadays waltzes, mazurkas, quadrilles, etc., were not danced.
> I justified the reason for the question.
> –What?! she replied. –People don't like those anymore... What today's dancers appreciate are soft songs, played "à ladiable," which are good to dance tango, foxtrot, ragtime, and...
> –Cakewalk? - I asked.
> –It is not yet danced or was already danced; but now something called shimmy is appearing.[2]

The new reality, especially in its emphasis on individualism, was felt by the writer of the newspaper *A Noite*, who summed up modern man as dynamic because life all around is conditioned by intense movement and constant, overwhelming agitation—one whose existence is demanding, difficult, and tumultuous, requiring extreme attention and effort.[3]

Nicolau Sevcenko, always with a sharp sense of synthesis and accuracy, highlights the importance of modernity as a concept underscoring the Jazz Age. In his view, modernity introduced a new meaning to history, its dynamic vector no longer viewed from some remote point in the past but from some place in the future.[4] In popular imagination, the word *modern* was inseparable from time, rhythm, speed, moving images, and action.

This internal change of ethos was naturally reflected in external appearances. The new decade brought to women a modern haircut—short, without volume—and a new style of clothing, using the lightness of silk. Though the style was simple, its short skirts shocked (**Figure 1**). Women shopped in the city and went out evenings for a stroll, recorded in wonderful photos published in *Revista da Semana*. They accepted jobs that were up to then exclusively for men. They went to cafes and smoked in public.

Figure 1: *Paratodos* magazine, March 1929.

[1] *Crítica*, December 12, 1928.
[2] *Gazeta de Notícias*, February 7, 1922.
[3] *A Noite*, January 26, 1929.
[4] Nicolau Sevcenko, *Orfeu extático na metrópole: São Paulo, sociedade e cultura nos frementes anos 20* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009), 228.

In this context, learning guitar meant more than studying music; it meant taking initiative. Playing the instrument publicly, thus going beyond the domestic realm, and even possibly embracing a profession, meant even more: it was provocative, a challenge to social mores.

II. Nair de Teffé (1886–1981)

Although the new directions of female behavior were set in the 1920s, it was in 1914 that a lady from Brazilian society appeared as the pioneer of this independent attitude: Nair de Teffé, daughter of Senator Admiral Baron of Teffé, a prominent figure in Brazilian political life. Well known both for her ancestry and culture—and idolized—Nair was an influential figure in Rio de Janeiro's intellectual and bohemian circles, one of few society women who worked.

Antonio Rodrigues, Nair's biographer, reveals that the Teffé family moved to Paris in 1901, when she had the opportunity to study painting in Madame Lavrut's course. A few years later she completed her studies in the district of the Cours Julien in Marseilles. What Rodrigues does not unveil is that Nair's musical education was not limited to the study of piano; she also learned guitar basics in classes with Marie Madeleine Cottin. Cottin was born in Paris in 1876 and worked as a guitar and mandolin teacher and composer. Her brothers, Alfredo and Júlio, also taught these instruments. Cottin is best remembered as author of the practical method she created for mandolin.

Nair dedicated herself to drawing, making her first caricatures in France. Her cartoons of high society figures, signed under the pseudonym Rian, were the first by a Brazilian woman. She published in Rio de Janeiro's magazine *Fon-Fon!*, collaborated in Parisian publications, and illustrated books such as *The Beautiful Rio de Janeiro* by Alfred Gray Bell (London, 1914). In 1913, she married the President of the Republic, Marshal Hermes da Fonseca, which marked the end of her artistic career (**Figure 2**). Shortly before the wedding, the French government, recognizing her artistic merits, awarded her the Legion of Education medal.

Figure 2: Nair de Teffé's wedding, 1913.

On October 26, 1914, a specific musical work and its performance made a particularly strong impact on the history of Brazilian popular culture: the *Corta-Jaca*, a maxixe composed by Chiquinha Gonzaga, accompanied by guitar in an official reception held at Catete Palace. It was played by Nair de Teffé, now wife of the president. The musical program was quite varied, and Nair's performance was outstanding as she presented chamber numbers for guitar and mandolin as well as songs. An arrangement of *Corta-Jaca* for solo guitar appears in the First Lady's music notebook.

Nair de Teffé was one of the first Brazilian women to play guitar publicly, anticipating a movement that would bear fruit in the late 1920s. Her performing, though regarded as modern for the time, was limited in influence by the strong male dominance of the day. Her career was highlighted by the tension between breaking of protocols in the exercise of roles meant for women and social expectation of female noninvolvement in political issues. It was only after the Marshal's death, in an interview granted to *Jornal de Petrópolis* in 1924, that Nair spoke about the struggle already underway by Brazilian women to gain citizenship rights such as voting enfranchisement. In sum, her trajectory was marked by the critical humor of her artistic production as against subservience to masculine power represented initially by her father and later by the Marshal.

III. Young ladies in *O violão*

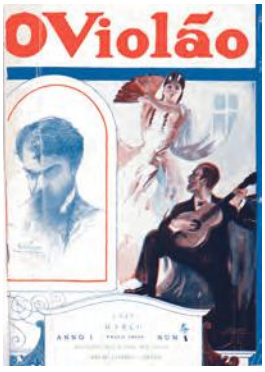

Figure 3: *O violão* magazine, March 1929.

In 1928, the magazine *O violão* (The Guitar) was launched in Rio de Janeiro, a monthly publication that remained active for a year, marking an important moment in the careers of guitarists, who would have—for the first time—their own media platform (**Figure 3**). Rich in information, the magazine published articles on the history of the instrument, artist profiles, accompaniment of traditional songs, works for solo guitar, pictures of guitarists, teachers' announcements, sale of instruments, and news of the guitar movement in the city and other Brazilian states. In short, it put guitar on the agenda of the day, creating opportunity for a real discussion of the instrument's performance possibilities and defending, above all, the guitar as something "noble."

O violão is the main reference for the activity of countless female singer-guitarists in the country. Quincas Laranjeiras, one of the major guitar teachers of the time, played a central role in the magazine, sending monthly accompaniments and arrangements of songs whose themes were generally inspired by regional subjects. Another teacher who dedicated himself to teaching songs accompanied by guitar was singer Patrício Teixeira, who guided an entire generation of young women from Rio's upper class. Among his students were Olga Praguer Coelho (see below), Linda Batista, Aurora Miranda, and Nara Leão, all renowned artists in Rio de Janeiro's cultural life.

O violão preserves the names of young female guitarists who performed onstage and on disc. In addition to the above-named were Stefana de Macedo, Gessy Barbosa, Helena de Magalhães Castro, Heloísa Helena, Yvonne Daumerie, Olga Bergamini de Sá, Mary Buarque, and many others. The magazine also reported on regional musical events organized in clubs and societies where guitar was the main accompanying instrument (**Figure 4**)—venues like Icarahy Violão Club, Brazilian Night at Tijuca Tênis Club, and Grêmio Regional Carioca.

Figure 5: Olga Bergamini de Sá.

Figure 4: Recital at Instituto Nacional de Música. Second from left, Carmen Miranda (see below) with some colleagues and her guitar teacher Josué de Barros (second from right). Center, behind, renowned composer Ernesto Nazareth.

Many of these performers were prominent figures in Rio society, some known for their successful careers in beauty contests. Such was the case with Laura Suarez, Miss Ipanema, whose guitar and singing recital was announced by the magazine. In the July edition, a photo of Suarez was published on the afternoon of her recital at *Theatro Lyrico*, next to distinguished writers such as poet Anna Amélia Carneiro de Mendonça, a woman associated with the Federation for the Progress of Brazilian Women. However, unrivaled success in beauty contests was achieved by the "intelligent and progressive" Miss Olga Bergamini de Sá, candidate from the Botafogo neighborhood, a singer-guitarist elected Miss Rio de Janeiro and later, in 1929, Miss Brazil (**Figure 5**).

IV. Olga Praguer Coelho (1909–2008)

Several other young Rio ladies developed viable musical careers, but among all who dedicated themselves to interpretation of songs, Olga Praguer Coelho (**Figure 6**, next page) stood out for the mastery with which she blended her voice to her guitar.[5] Born in Manaus, Coelho spent her childhood in Bahia and moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1923. She began taking guitar lessons while she simultaneously studied lyrical singing, earning her degree at the *Instituto Nacional de Música*.

Her performance as a musician began in radio shows and charity events, leading to forty recitals in one month alone. This routine, besides being a fundamental stage of her artistic evolution, encapsulated the social movement that marked the development in her career: she always performed in elite settings, whether economic, political, or intellectual. In September 1930 she married poet and translator Gaspar Luis Coelho, establishing a union based on companionship.

[5] Coelho's artistic trajectory is the subject of a forthcoming article by me.

Figure 6: Olga Praguer Coelho, center, with her students.

In 1935 the artist was part of President Getúlio Vargas's entourage during his visit to Montevideo and Buenos Aires. She traveled to Europe between 1937 and 1939, and was in Paris as a guest at the Bastille Day celebrations, performing alongside artists such as Marlene Dietrich, Marta Eggerth, and Maurice Chevalier. In London she presented herself to Queen Mary and became the first South American to take part in a music television program. In 1939 she conducted an unprecedented tour that included performances in New Zealand, Australia, Oceania, Singapore, Java, Asia, and Mozambique.

In the 1940s Olga did many performances in the United States, where she met Andrés Segovia. They fell in love and lived together in New York for about fifteen years. With Segovia, Olga circulated within the world art elite, close to the most important interpreters and composers of the 20th century, some of whom dedicated works to her. Once separated from Segovia, Olga carried on living in the city for another ten years.

Her American debut took place in New York's Town Hall on February 9, 1943. Her baptism of fire happened, however, a few years later, when on the same stage she sang Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5. A piece originally written for voice and cellos, it was transcribed for voice and guitar by the composer, especially for Olga. In the audience were Segovia, Villa-Lobos, and *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, who wrote of her: "A musician and an artist, she always confers style upon whatever she interprets, and the listener leaves the hall having been enriched in his experience of music that reflects the spirit, customs and environments of many lands."[6]

Olga brought Brazil and Latin America's numerous voices to the world. She performed in the main halls of Europe and America. In 1942 she sang at the White House (**Figure 6**), invited by Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote: "Madame Olga Praguer Coelho, of Brazil, gave us a program of songs, sung to her guitar, which she plays remarkably. Many of you have heard her over the radio but watching her adds enormously to the pleasure of her performance."[7]

Olga's art was distinguished by fastidious repertoire selection and the expertise with which she mastered voice and guitar in instrumental arrangements of great virtuosity. Despite standing beside and under Segovia's shadow for close to two decades, she managed to build a priceless musical legacy, unfortunately unknown to the public and recognized and respected only by experts.

6 *The New York Times*, February 16, 1953.

7 Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," January 2, 1942.

V. Conclusion

Practice of folksong highlights an essential cultural awakening in many countries. In Brazil, this pursuit flourished in a context that strongly influenced modernism and embraced the union of two cultural tendencies: (1) resumption of nationalist fervor, reflected in the elevation of a nativist repertoire, and (2) demonstration of cosmopolitanism, most visibly symbolized by the musical performances of young and independent women within Rio de Janeiro's evolving cultural milieu.

Marcia Taborda earned a PhD in Social History and recently developed a postdoctoral research program at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. As a researcher she has been granted awards from the most important Brazilian institutions. Dr. Taborda is author of the documentary *The Guitar in the City of Rio de Janeiro* (viewable on YouTube) and has published the book *Guitar and National Identity*. She has also recorded the guitar works of acclaimed composer Paulinho da Viola. Dr. Taborda's research, teaching, and performance are inextricably linked, which has helped consolidate her status as one of the preeminent guitar scholars in Brazil.