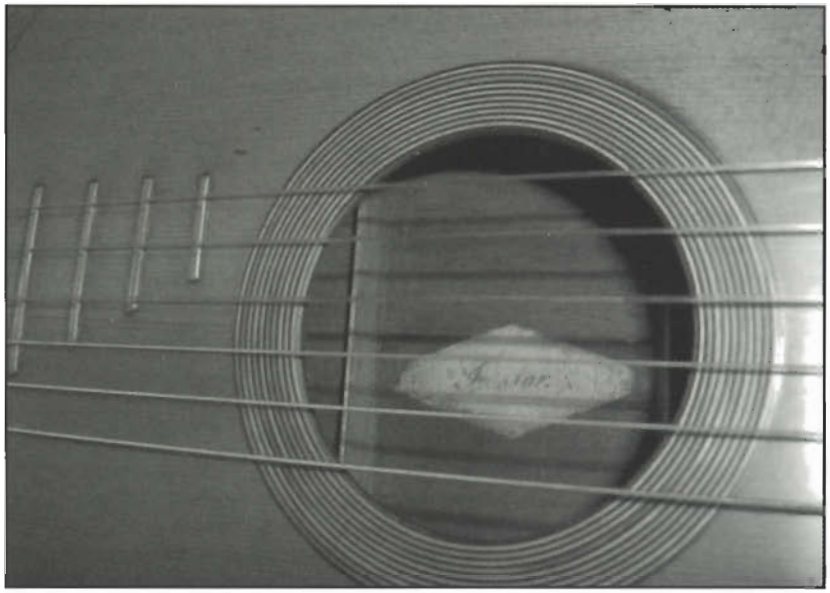
LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

IF I could rewrite a new version of E.L. Konigsberg's children's book, *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, it would be an adventure about hiding out in the bathroom at closing time so I could pluck and tinker after hours within the Crosby Brown Collection of the Musical Instrument Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The collection, which includes everything from 17th century guitars to both Segovia's Ramirez and Hauser guitars, was started by Mrs. John Crosby Brown, a banker's wife, who amassed some 276 instruments and entrusted them to the care of the museum in 1889. Combined with the American, European and non-Western examples of musical instruments donated by Lucy Drexel, the widow of the Director of the New York Philharmonic who was also a museum trustee, this formed one of the largest permanent musical instrument collections outside of Europe.



Fernando Sor guitar.

Ken Moore, the curator of this collection, and Principal Technician Joe Peknik showed me one of the earliest precursors to the lute in the Egyptian Art collection. The instrument, which has a roughly 15 cm wide, tulip-vase shaped soundboard and slim neck, dates from 200-500 A.D. and is of Roman/Byzantium origin. Peknik tells me it originally had four strings and that the soundboard, possibly cypress is thicker in the middle and tapers off toward the edges, while its neck, back and sides are made entirely from one piece of wood. Interestingly, it has a number of tiny soundholes which look like the decorative fork jabs on the top but Peknik says, 'Those holes drilled in at specific angles—it's not a haphazard arrangement. This particular instrument happens to be one of five in existence.'

Peknik ushered me upstairs for a private tour of the André Mertens Galleries for Musical Instruments. Please note that if you should ever come in from out of town and find this exhibit closed, ask for assistance at the information desk and there is a good chance someone will be able to escort you through the collection. Probably the best thing to do is call in advance to make arrangements. In the hallway, we passed by a late nineteenth century Puerto Rican guitar called a Jíburo, a 5-stringed instrument with African textile patterns carved into its sides. It was accompanied by a 20th century Bordonuá Puertorriqueño, which is more or less the equivalent of a Spanish-style bass guitar.

Once inside the Mertens Galleries, Peknik informed me that the guitar exhibit is not an exact timeline or precise representation on the evolution of guitars as much as a display of various examples of guitars from important makers and time periods. Standing alone inside its own case is a 5-course guitar from Venice dated around 1630, attributed to the maker Matteo Sellas, with a reconstructed headstock and original neck. Its headstock, rosette and bridge had been expertly replaced by London luthier Brian Cohen. The ribs of the guitar are fluted snakewood separated by bone inlay with a vaulted back and hunting scenes etched scrimshaw-style into the bone rosette set into a pine top with a parchment rosette.

'This guitar is attributed to Matteo Sellas but possibly made by one of his followers,' Peknik tells me. 'Many of these makers were not one-man operations. For example, 16th Century lute maker Lux Mahler, had in an inventory at his death, one thousand lute tops, which points to the shop having more than one workman.'

Luthier Brian Cohen shared with me that the Sellas guitar had come to him for repair from a private collector, who had informed him it originally had belonged to an old Italian family. 'When this guitar arrived in his studio, it had no rosette and the head was a 6 string, 19th century 'figure 8' shaped peghead—completely wrong. The guitar was set up for a 6 string configuration and the neck was cut down. The bridge was 19th century 6 string pin type, again all wrong. There was extensive worm damage to the area where neck/head joined and a number of pieces were missing from the back and ribs.

'The neck had also been cut down into a 'Battente', so it needed reconstructing with new

wood and inlays to match with the original. This also included making new inlay panels for the front of neck. The bridge was new, made to coincide with markings revealed on the table.

'Internally this guitar had no label. It had its original top and bottom blocks and original handmade nails to secure neck while being made—but did bear the brand "MS" on the underside of the table. So, based on the brand and the style of work, we felt it appropriate to attribute the headstock with the Matteo Sellas name. The guitar is almost certainly from his workshop.

Cohen remade the entire head and pegs from legal ivory (pre Cites) and ebony, glued up and built up in the same method as the original would have been. He remedied the worm damage to the neck and strengthened under the neck veneer. 'The neck itself was extended by inserting new wood,' he says, 'and the making of matching inlays to the back of the neck were all made in the correct original idiom.' Cohen completed the same work for the fingerboard to extend to the correct original proportions and then fitted the new head and pegs. He also made new ivory panels for the extended fingerboard and blended in to match all the artwork and engraving, which he did himself. To repair the damage to the back and ribs, Cohen made new pieces of matching wood, keeping at all times as much of the original as possible. 'It is my preference to use the original material rather than to replace with new, for conservation and historic record reasons. So the guitar is "conserved" rather than 'restored.'

'The table was basically in good condition with some cracks, which I repaired. But no rose was present.' Cohen made a new one, patterned according to the Venetian style of guitar making of that period. The materials he used included parchment, cut and punched out with specially-made fine punches and knives and built up from many layers within each tier, creating a layered effect and depth to each tier with the whole toned down with pigments and varnish to simulate aging to make it blend in. Cohen also restored the guitar to its original 5 course configuration.

'This job took me two years to complete and is one of many similar conservation projects I have done,' he says. 'Other guitars I have worked on in a similar way include the Voboam guitar, now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and restored to fine playing condition. I also worked on a guitar attributed to "Potenti", Stoss, another Sellas and a few that have no "attribution" at all but all of them are fine examples of Italian and French 17th century guitar making, in private and museum collections all over the world.'

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has its own 1697 Parisian guitar by maker Jean-Baptiste Voboam guitar, made of ivory and tortoiseshell accompanied by a late 17th C. guitar by maker Giacomo Ertel (1646-1711). This unusual guitar has a back and sides made of tiny squares made of bone, rosewood and ebony, creating confetti-happy effect. Peknik angled the guitar for me under the light so I could better see the impeccable workmanship of each piece put together in neat, precise squares with perfect joinery. Next to this instrument hangs another guitar with an Escher-style design of three-dimensional cubes, attributed to Belgian guitar maker Lekeu. In this same grouping is a Seville guitar dated 1780, possibly made by Joseph de Frias and serving as an example of a six course Spanish guitar of the late 18th Century. Accompanying this guitar is a comparatively plain-looking late 18th century guitar made by Benito Sanchez de Aguilera.

The early 19th century introduced a hybrid instrument called the harp-o-lyre. One of these representative instruments in the Met collection happens to be a 3-necked beast topped with gilded brass Greco-Roman swags and mythological figures, believed to be one of the precursor to the double-headed SG electric guitar series. (Think Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin.) This particular guitar has a normal 6-string neck for its middle neck and then the outer two necks are bass strings tuned diatonically and chromatically. Peknik points out the bottom of the instrument has what looks like an end pin but it's actually part of a springlike attachment that holds the guitar in playing position and connects to a resonating box.

Then there is the harp-lute by Edward Light, with black painted wood with gilt floral decorations and a harp column with acanthus leaves of gilt gesso and a very rudimentary fretboard of nine frets. 'This was played mostly by women portrayed as lounging around and strumming in Greco-Roman dress of the Empire Period.' Peknik tells me these

instruments were made by the thousands in the early 19th Century. 'You'll find that no two are ever alike in their decoration and setup.'

The exhibit also features two lyre guitars dating from 1805 and 1815, played by the same women. These were made by Parisian makers of the early 19th century. One is of spruce and mahogany, a gilt brass flower rosette with carved wooden scrolls covered in gilt gesso.

The museum also has a Stauffer guitar in its collection, a narrow-waisted instrument dating from 1835-40 with an adjustable neck. The collection also includes an 1831 *arpeggione* by Stauffer, known in the 19th Century as a 'bowed guitar' and it has the same tuning as a guitar. Considered the last surviving member of the viola de gamba family, this instrument happens to be fretted and shaped more like a cello. 'Makers in the 19th century were always experimenting,' Peknik says. 'The frets on this instrument give it a distinctive sound.'

Sitting beside the Stauffer guitar is an 1838 C.F. Martin, who was a student of Stauffer's. The Martin guitar features bird's eye maple back and sides, an adjustable neck. Peknik tells me that the enclosed machine heads on this guitar might have been imported from Stauffer. He also points out a mid-19th century Parisian guitar made by Mauchant fréres which features upper register frets shaped uniquely like arrows. Beside it is a wild-looking guitar from 1858 attributed to maker Pedro Fuentes with heavy banding and tiny miniature mosaics of a squirrel holding a nut. Peknik informs me the label inside this guitar and the inside its case are both pasted over by another coated label which cannot be soaked off without destroying the other. 'Usually the museum uses UV light to examine an instrument closely to identify repair and label details,' he says. 'While a label can appear to be completely black with dust and dirt under ordinary light, shining a UV light on it often helps make a name or significant detail pop right up. But in the case of this particular guitar, we're unable to read the text beneath the other label.' The Fuentes guitar was purchased from a Spanish gypsy and is categorized as being somewhere between a classical and a folk guitar. The soundboard is pine with an unusual amount of purfling and mosaic inlays. 'It has a great sound in spite of all the inlay.' The museum, in fact, sells a recording made by Spanish guitarist Augustin Maruri featuring this guitar.

The two most famous guitars in the collection, of course, are the 1912 Ramirez and the 1937 Hauser donated by Andrés Segovia in 1986. Peknik says, 'The day of the donation, Segovia entered the museum by the parking garage and insisted on not using his wheelchair and walked the three or four blocks to the gallery. This was about six months before he died. He presented the Ramirez and the Hauser guitars to the Director of the Museum, Philippe de Montebello, near where the guitars are currently displayed. He and his wife Emelita made a specific request that these guitars may never be played. When you see this guitar, you are looking at the original Augustine strings he had used.

'The story behind the Ramirez guitar is that it was originally an 11-string instrument that never sold. Ramirez reconfigured it into a 6-string.' The tell-tale clue verifying this story is the set of filled-in peg-holes in the back of the headstock, neatly lined up in pairs. 'Ramirez had given him this guitar as a gift in 1913.' Peknik says.

'Many people mistakenly believe the museum has the blueprints for this guitar but we don't. Luthier Richard Bruné wrote them up and packaged it with a set of CDs issued by Dynamic which the museum unfortunately does not carry in its shop.' This guitar has cross-figuring running through the grain on the soundboard, which Peknik tells me is a good sounding wood known as *hazelfichte*. The official museum audio tour provides sound samples. (For those curious, the aforementioned Bruné CD is entitled *The Guitar of Andrés Segovia, Hermann Hauser 1937: Its History, Sound and Photographs* and it is available online through both CD Universe or www.elderly.com.)

When asked if there are any other guitaristic treasures squirrelled away not seeing the light of day, Peknik escorted me into the one of the museum's inner storage sanctums which happens to be his office. Stepping into this area reminded me a bit of the closing scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—the slow pan of a museum warehouse filled with thousands of crates all stamped 'Top Secret.' I suppose it's safe to say it is filled with phantasmagorical musical and historical curiosities of every description, made with the kind of loving and exquisite workmanship that is rare to find these days. I half expected ghosts of their former owners to jump up and start striking up a gothic Danny Elfman-like tune all at once. I asked Peknick if he ever gets nightmares from handling these items, filled with several centuries of history and lifetimes of wear and tear by their owners.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Never. And I've been working here for 21 years.'

He took down a Lacote guitar from a shelf, dated approximately 1830 with enclosed machine heads, Brazilian rosewood sides, veneer on neck and the official Lacote stamp on its headstock. This guitar had been formerly owned by Julian Bream and its swoon factor comes in the form of a yellowed, diamond-shaped label pasted inside the soundhole featuring Fernando Sor's signature. 'Rumour has it that Sor signed the best Lacote's guitars as an endorsement.'

For an online glimpse of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instrument Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, log onto:
http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_Art/department.asp?dep=18
And for further information on luthier Brian Cohen's work:
www.soundpost.co.uk