



Guitar by Vicente Arias 1900

Javier RIBA and John RAY

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marian PEÓN

This historical instrument, which has an exceptional sound, may well have played a deciding role in the development of the musical sensitivities of the young Andrés Segovia. Segovia lived at that time in Granada and was a student of the flamenco guitar. This brief article, in addition to shedding some light on the technical aspects of this guitar and the little we know about its maker, will tell the story of the connection between Arias and Segovia.¹

The guitar maker

Vicente Arias (1833-1914) is considered one of the most important figures in the organological development of the guitar. In the words of Allorto, Arias is the only contemporary of Antonio de Torres who made guitars of a similar quality and places him as a fundamental link between the genius of Almeria and Manuel Ramírez.² Grondona, on the other hand, considers Vicente Arias to be an autonomous figure and formulates the hypothesis that places him historically as a titanic antagonist to Torres.³ Lastly, for Romanillos, Arias represents one of the pinnacles of Spanish guitar making.⁴

There has been very little written of Vicente Arias Castellanos and the dictionary of Romanillos and Harris is, since its publication in 2002, the fundamental reference.⁵ Arias worked as a guitar maker for a large part of his life in Ciudad Real and then for his last working years moved to Madrid. From that first stage of his professional life we have only a few isolated references. Pujol, in his biography of Francisco Tárrega, reports that the guitarist from Vila-real had a guitar made for him by Vicente Arias:

¹ We are thankful for the collaboration of Luis Briso de Montiano, Julio Gimeno and Jesús Panadero.

² Enrico ALLORTO: "L'organologia", *La Chitarra*, Turin: EDT, 1990, p. 12.

³ Stefano GRONDONA y Luca WALDNER: *Masterpieces of Guitar making*, Sondrio: L'officina del libro, 2002, pp. 100-101.

⁴ Javier RIBA (ed.): *Nombres propios de la guitarra, vol. 6. Antonio de Torres*, Córdoba: IMAE Gran Teatro – Ayuntamiento de Córdoba, 2008, pp. 138 y 139.

⁵ José Luis ROMANILLOS VEGA y Marian HARRIS WINSPEAR: *The Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar. A Dictionary of the Makers of Plucked and Bowed Instruments of Spain (1200-2002)*, Guijosa, Guadalajara: The Sanguino Press, 2002, s.v. "Arias Castellanos, Vicente", pp. 20 y 21.



Tárrega came to identify himself with the guitar to such a degree that his very nature seemed to suffer when he was separated from the instrument. To this end, some time in 1878-79, he had Vicente Arias, that famous guitar maker from Ciudad Real, make him a special guitar imagined by Tárrega of much smaller dimensions in order to carry it under his cape. This allowed him to discreetly exercise his fingers to improve their strength and flexibility.⁶

Whether it was Tarrega's idea or not, the truth is that some authors describe the guitars of Arias as “smaller instruments”. Prat – who calls him a maker “very worthy of note” - tells us that his instruments were made, mostly, in a smaller format than the day's norm (1934) and refers specifically to an instrument made in 1874.⁷

In the nineteenth century Spanish press, we find references to the activity of Arias. In 1890⁸, for example, “an artistic guitar by Vicente Arias of Ciudad Real” was presented in Madrid (in the Gardens of the “Retiro”) at the “Industrial, Agricultural and Artistic Exhibition” organised by the European Scientific Society. Romanillos y Harris show that Vicente Arias' name was present in the commercial directories of his city as a guitar maker from 1898 to 1900.⁹ The earliest known reference to his activity as a maker in Madrid is shown on the label of a guitar signed in that city in 1903. According to that information, the guitar which we present here in this article can be considered the oldest one from Arias' Madrid period and perhaps one of the first that he built after establishing himself in the capital. The label

⁶ Emilio PUJOL: *Tárrega. Ensayo biográfico*, Valencia: Artes Gráficas Soler, 1978 (primera edición Lisboa, 1960), p. 77.

⁷ Domingo PRAT: *Diccionario de guitarristas*, Buenos Aires: Romero y Fernández, 1934 (edición facsímil, Columbus: Orphée, 1986), p. 358.

⁸ *La Iberia*, 26-x-1890, p. 2.

⁹ ROMANILLOS VEGA y HARRIS WINSPEAR: *The vihuela de Mano...*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

reads: “VICENTE ARIAS / CONSTRUCTOR DE GUITARRAS / Huertas n° 29 dupdo MADRID”. The signature and date are hand-written: “1900 / Vicente Arias”.

This guitar is in a very good state of conservation, is functional from a musical point of view and renders up the acoustic treasures of the best guitars of the Spanish school that we have been able to examine and play. It is balanced and has clear voices, depth in the lower register and a wide range of nuance in the tone.

Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar and Andrés Segovia

The original owner of this instrument was Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar y Burgos (1865-1912), a property registrar¹⁰ with artistic and literary interests.¹¹ The descendents de Ruiz de Almodóvar conserve along with the guitar a story closely associated with their ancestor: Gabriel had spent time in Granada with a young amateur flamenco guitarist named Andrés Segovia to whom -according to the family- he had given guitar lessons.¹²

Andrés Segovia relates in his autobiography the profound impression that was produced upon meeting Ruiz de Almodóvar for the first time:

It did not take long for these and other friends, all usually older than I, to see that my devotion to the guitar went further than flamenco. One day they took me to the villa of José Gago Palomo, a colonel who had settled in the Albaicín (Granada's picturesque old section) after retiring from the army that had lost us our “Pearl of the Antilles,” Cuba. There I met Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar who played a “good” guitar, as the flamencos have it: that is to say, he played classical music. What a wonderful discovery it was for me to hear him play one of Tárrega's preludes, even though his fingers fumbled quite often! I felt like crying, laughing, even like kissing the hands of a man who could draw such beautiful sounds from the guitar! My passion for music seemed to explode into flames. I was trembling. A sudden wave of disgust for the folk pieces I had been playing came over me, mixed with a delirious obsession to learn “that music” immediately. Don Gabriel was good enough to tell my friends and me that these preludes were in print, as well as many other works by the same and other composers.¹³



¹⁰ In a letter which Ruiz de Almodóvar writes to Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912), he introduces himself as a “poor property registrar”. *Epistolario de Menéndez Pelayo*, volumen 17, carta n° 589: <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/FichaObra.html?Ref=29405>> (consulted in noviembre of 2010).

¹¹ In *La ilustración española y americana*, 15-vi-1889, p. 376, a notification appears of the publication of *Libro de Granada*, a volume containing various writings by Ángel Ganivet (1865-1898), Gabriel Ruiz Almodóvar, Matías Méndez Vellido y Nicolás María López, members of the “Cofradía del Avellano”, a group of Granada artists and writers.

¹² Testimony of D. José Palacios Entrena, son of D. Rafael Palacios y Ruiz de Almodóvar who was in turn a nephew of D. Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar y Burgos, original owner of the Vicente Arias of 1900.

¹³ Andrés SEGOVIA: *An autobiography of the years 1893-1920*, Londres: Marion Boyars, 1977.



The encounter between a young Andrés Segovia and Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar must have occurred between 1905, the year lieutenant-colonel José Gago Palomo was relieved¹⁴ –Segovia remembers meeting Gabriel in José Gago's house when he was a retired officer – and 1909 and 1910 which is when Segovia gave his first public concerts (as far as we know).¹⁵

This contact with Gabriel Ruiz de Almodóvar might well have been a determining factor in the artistic orientation of Segovia;¹⁶ it allowed him to hear the music of Tárrega, to discover the world of sonority of the guitar classical guitar, so different to the one he already knew and he found it fascinating. In a relatively short period of time which passed between this meeting up until 1909- if we interpret his memoirs strictly-

¹⁴ *Madrid científico*, año XII, n° 485 (1905), p. 20: “pasa á esta situación [reemplazo] el Teniente Coronel D. José Gago Palomo”.

¹⁵ Andrés Segovia remembered his first concert in Granada: “Thanks to a noble friend my first concert was organized at the Centro Artístico in Granada. And so I went, with my baggage of dreams and hopes. I am not sure of the date of that concert, according to approximate calculations it must have been very near the end of 1909”. Transcript of the autobiographical recording titled “La guitarra y yo” in volume 4, tracks 7-12 of the CD *Andrés Segovia. A Centenary Celebration* (MCA CLASSICS / DECCA, 1994, MCAD4-11124). This transcription is published in Eugenio TOBALINA (ed.): *Nombres propios de la guitarra, vol. 2. Andrés Segovia*, Córdoba: FPM Gran Teatro – Ayuntamiento de Córdoba, 2004. Segovia's debut in Córdoba was on Christmas day of 1910 (*Diario de Córdoba de comercio, industria, administración, noticias y avisos*, 24-XII-1910).

¹⁶ However, Prat tells a very different version of Segovia's first contact with the classical guitar: “There in Granada, even as a small boy, he[Segovia] already played the guitar of rasgueados and falsetas. The revelation that it was a true musical instrument was caused by a friend and disciple of Tárrega, the ventriloquist and guitarist Paco Sanz of Valencia, much celebrated in Buenos Aires around 1912. During a series of concerts by Sanz in Spain, Segovia heard some of Tárrega's repertoire in Andalucía through the playing of Sanz (according to Sanz): and thus the spark was produced.” (D. PRAT: *Diccionario de guitarristas...*, *op. cit.*, s.v. Andrés Segovia, p. 290).

this young guitarist discovers his passion for the classical guitar, develops his technique and collects a repertoire which allows him to take the first steps of what later became a stunningly brilliant career.

The instrument

The guitar shows various characteristics which we have seen in other guitars made by this master builder:¹⁷ A double back made of rosewood; a rosette fashioned with curved pieces as opposed to a mosaic; a lip on the back of the bridge where the strings are tied on; a fretboard with 21 frets under the first string and a three-lobed headstock.

The instrument which we present here is in a magnificent state of conservation. There is evidence of a saw cut just below the binding of the back, at what might be the thickness of the back which would have allowed the back to be removed. Two small plugged holes are visible on the outside which might have been used to reposition the back when it was re-glued.

The original craftsmanship is excellent; in our opinion certainly up to the standard of the guitars of Antonio de Torres and Santos Hernandez that we have been able to examine. However, there are a number of Arias' guitars that are more richly decorated than this one.

One of the most surprising aspects of this guitar is the extreme flexibility of the top. Pushing lightly on the top with the fingers of one hand on the bridge or its surroundings causes the top to move downwards to a surprising degree but to return to its original position as soon as the pressure is removed in a movement which might best be called diaphragmatic. Our experience is that this is the most flexible top we have ever seen on a guitar and surely is at the limit of the mechanical resistance of the wood. So it is surprising that, even after 110 years the top is in such good condition.

The bracing consists of 7 fan struts with no closing bars like in the typical Torres pattern. There are however a few very short bars in unusual places.

The internal back shows two circular holes with a diameter of 30 millimetres symmetrically placed under the wings of the bridge. The thickness of this back is 1.5 millimetres and is made similar to a normal back: three bars and a lining at the union with the sides. The difference is that bars, as well as the lining are of reduced dimensions.

On the back of the headstock, there are two pieces of cedar which might be a reinforcement for the peg holes and were added at a later time. Judging from the position of these reinforcements we should consider the possibility that this guitar once held mechanical tuners and these added pieces filled in the slots. On the other hand there is no other indication that this modification was indeed performed.

¹⁷ Romanillos states in his biography of Torres that he is aware of eighteen instruments made by Vicente Arias (José Luis ROMANILLOS: *Antonio de Torres, guitarrero, su vida y obra*, Almería: Instituto de Estudios Almerienses, 2004, p. 172).

Wood:

Top: Spruce.

Back (interior y exterior): Brazilian Rosewood.

Neck: Honduran Cedar.

Fretboard and bridge: Brazilian Rosewood, perhaps with some treatment to make it darker.

Measurements:

Body depth at:

End block: 93 mm.

Heel: 92 mm.

Upper bout: 92 mm.

Waist: 92 mm.

Lower bout: 92¹⁸ mm.

Sound-hole diameter: 86 mm.

Distance from interior back to the edge of the sound-hole: 79 mm.

Body length: 479 mm.

Upper bout width: 264 mm.

Width at waist: 228 mm.

Lower bout width: 365 mm.

Scale length: 650 mm.

It was necessary to perform a few adjustments to the guitar. The saddle and nut were substituted as they were inappropriate in both size and shape. It is impossible that these were the originals. The frets had been levelled at some point but had not been rounded and polished so that was done to eliminate buzzes that were present. The tuning pegs and the holes were very worn and we opted for replacing them with a mechanical peg with internal gearing which looks similar to a traditional peg. A small tap plate was partly fixed to the top and it seemed better to remove it completely rather than have it hanging there. There seem to be some cracks in the external back which we believe were repaired (this might explain the removal of the back that we detected.)¹⁹ but cannot be seen from the sound-hole due to the presence of the interior back. In any case, these small cracks do not affect the instrument and furthermore seem to have been repaired or at least immobilized.

¹⁸ These last few measurements are likely different from the original ones due to the process of cutting off the back and the replacement of it that we are sure the guitar underwent.

¹⁹ We ruled out taking the back off in order to evaluate the cracks because in the preceeding operation that we detected- quite inexpertly done by the way- the removal of the back eliminated the clues which would allow us to measure the original curve of the back in order to duplicate it.



To examine this guitar is to come to terms with techniques and construction methods which are, in some cases, sadly disappearing. On the surface of the interior back there are light marks of the tothing plane which was used to produce flat surfaces and consequently to obtain uniform thicknesses. Normally these signs will disappear upon scraping or sanding. On the underside of the top, in the position of the bridge, we discovered a slightly blackened zone which indicates that there was heat applied there to ensure activation of the hide glue used for the union of bridge and top.

This instrument is a living testament to the genius of Vicente Arias in his capacity as guitar maker. From the depths of its “well of wood” the sounds of another time wait to be awakened. Among these sounds it the echos of the prelude by Tárrega that forever marked the direction of the artistic career of Andrés Segovia.

