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## The Idiom of the Classical Guitar: Analysing the Concept in Relation to the Challenges of Contemporary Repertoire

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### Abstract

The term 'idiom of the classical guitar' is frequently used to intuitively identify the set of characteristics associated with this instrument. It serves as a cognitive shortcut, referencing the particulars of the instrument in general. In this context, intuition frequently leads to the exploration of Iberian roots and Latin American popular music. However, each period has seen new advances in performance technique and perception of the instrument, which have broadened the definition of the idiom. Contemporary compositions demand a continual reassessment of what is perceived as 'natural' and therefore suitable for performance on the guitar. This article presents a historical account of the formation of the term *guitar idiom*, offers a critical analysis of the various interpretations of its meaning, identifies the essential criteria for defining a composition as idiomatic, develops a comprehensive definition of idiomaticity, and addresses the question of whether, in view of the incompatibility of interpretations and the ongoing expansion of the semantic framework of the guitar idiom, its use should be abandoned. In order to achieve this objective, the article pre-

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sents the perspectives of modern scholars and artists in juxtaposition with an analysis of recent musical compositions that represent significant milestones in the evolution of the guitar's idiomatic potential.

**Keywords:** classical guitar, idiom of the classical guitar, music, music aesthetics.

## Introduction

This article is based on the lecture delivered by the author during the 4th Conference of PhD Students and Young Researchers 'The Guitar in Scientific Research' held at the Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa on 17 April 2024.

The research into the notion of the idiom of the classical guitar was prompted by the observation that there is a considerable divergence in the interpretations of the term as evidenced in the contributions and writings that employ it. While it is a commonly used term, it is not a code which is universally understood, both by its users and by its recipients. The term 'guitar idiom' has thus ceased to serve its original function as a semantic code<sup>1</sup>.

The principal objective of this article is to establish a semantic framework for the term in question, to organise the contexts in which divergent interpretations of the term operate, and to formulate a synthetic definition of the new classical guitar idiom based on an analysis of the compositional and performance devices present in contemporary guitar works.

The research will serve to substantiate the hypothesis that the term *idiom* is currently employed in an anachronistic and imprecise manner to describe a plethora of phenomena and performance devices. It is thus advisable to either update or abandon its use entirely.

However, it seems appropriate in this context to begin by quoting the primary meanings of the term *idiom*, as defined outside of the field of musicology.

### 1. Idiom: Key Definitions

The term *idiom* is defined by lexicographic sources as 'a word, expression, or phrase specific to a given language'<sup>2</sup> or 'dialect, vernacular, or regionalism'<sup>3</sup>. The Greek etymological root refers to something 'personal, unique, or peculiar'<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Hymes, *On Communicative Competence*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics. Selected readings*, ed. J. Pride, J. Holmes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1972, p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> entry *idiom*, [in:] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/idiom.html>, [access: 3 September 2024].

<sup>3</sup> entry *idiom*, [in:] *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. Witold Doroszewski, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/doroszewski/idiom;5434151.html>, [access: 1 October 2024].

<sup>4</sup> D. Huron, J. Berec, *Characterizing Idiomatic Organization in Music: A Theory and Case Study of Musical Affordances*, 'Empirical Musicology Review' 2009, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 103.

A more substantial potential for interpreting the concept within a musical framework is proposed by David Huron and Jonathon Berc who define idiomaticism as a distinctive form of expression specific to a given language, mode of interaction, or physical context<sup>5</sup>. Such an interpretation highlights the plurality of phenomena and forms of expression that can be characterised as idiomatic. They therefore extend beyond distinctive expressions or verbal constructions. The authors also highlight that contemporary language idioms are primarily constituted of colloquial expressions, which cannot be translated directly into other languages<sup>6</sup>. This concept was subsequently developed by Błażej Sudnikowicz in his dissertation, in which he observed that:

[...] Idioms are frequently transferred from one language to another, thus becoming distinctive features of a greater number of languages<sup>7</sup>.

However, the opposite phenomenon can also be observed: unique verbal constructions that constitute a code understood only within a given culture and are undecipherable in other places where the same language is dominant. For example, peculiar British phrases do not have identical meanings in the United States and vice versa<sup>8</sup>.

A concise examination of fundamental linguistic definitions reveals that the idiom can be analysed by extending or narrowing its semantic framework. Issues pertaining to contemporary language appear to necessitate a sophisticated methodology, one that draws upon the insights of both linguistics and cultural studies. It is thus a predictor of the situation that may be anticipated as a consequence of the application of the term in question within the field of music. It is essential to consider the full range of phenomena, encompassing not only the characteristics of the guitar but also the stylistic elements, performance techniques and musical tradition.

## 2. The Performance Potential of the Guitar Throughout Its History: A Review of Selected Publications

The subject of the guitar's expressive capabilities can be found as early as the 19th century in treatises on orchestration and later in texts by composers,

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> B. Sudnikowicz, *Idiom gitary klasycznej w solowej literaturze minimalistycznej na podstawie wybranych kompozycji*, [doctoral thesis under the direction of M. Nosal], Akademia Muzyczna im. K. Szymanowskiego w Katowicach, Katowice 2019, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. S. Bhanoo, *What is Alliteration?* [in:] *Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms*, 21 March 2023, Oregon State University, Source: <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-idiom-definition-examples>, [access: 12 July 2024].

musicologists, and performers. An outline of the view that emerges from these works is essential for comprehending contemporary trends in the understanding of the idiom. In fact, the echoes of opinions established in past centuries still reverberate in the minds of creators and audiences of music intended for the instrument.

The guitar did not occupy a significant position within the symphonic orchestras of the 19th century. Consequently, 'in the maze of exhaustive information on orchestral instruments and the potential for combining them, the guitar is a blank space'<sup>9</sup>. The most significant works on orchestration from the 19th century are those by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Hector Berlioz, and Richard Wagner.

In the chapter entitled 'String Instruments' of his work, *The Principles of Orchestration*, the Russian composer did not include the guitar. He only mentioned the group:

[...] A quantity of national instruments not included in the present work may be incorporated into the orchestra; such are the guitar, the domra, zither, mandolin, the oriental tambourine, small tambourine etc. These instruments are employed from time to time for descriptive-aesthetic purposes<sup>10</sup>.

In the absence of any mention in R. Wagner's treatise 'Über das Dirigieren'<sup>11</sup>, the most pertinent source on the perception of the guitar in the second half of the 19th century is H. Berlioz's 'Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes'. In addition to a comprehensive account of scales and various techniques, such as arpeggios, tremolos, tertian progressions, and chordal play, the author presents the instrument as well-suited for conducting accompaniment for vocal performances and for executing instrumental pieces with 'restrained dynamics'<sup>12</sup>. In the view of the composer, it is a considerable challenge to compose pieces for the guitar without having a high level of competence on the instrument:

nevertheless, the majority of composers who use it are not well-versed in its intricacies. Consequently, they tend to compose pieces that are overly complex, devoid of tonal richness, and fail to make a lasting impression<sup>13</sup>.

Berlioz repeatedly highlights the distinctive appeal of the guitar's melancholic timbre yet deems it insufficiently audible to integrate effectively with other instruments in a chamber ensemble. Concurrently, he makes the following observation:

<sup>9</sup> M. Maślak, *Idiom gitary w relacji kompozytor–wykonawca*, Seis Cordas, Zabrze 2019, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> N. Rimski-Korsakow, *Principles of Orchestration*, E.F. Kalmus Orchestra Scores, Inc., USA 1888, p. 118 (translated by E. Agate).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. Wagner, *Über das Dirigieren*, Hofenberg, Niemcy 2015.

<sup>12</sup> H. Berlioz, *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*, Schonenberger, Paris 1844, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

In contrast to the majority of other instruments, the guitar suffers when used in an ensemble. The sound of twelve guitars playing in unison is outright absurd<sup>14</sup>.

Other sources presenting the characteristics and capabilities of the guitar at the time come from virtuoso composers from the so-called Golden Age of the guitar (the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and the first half of the 19th century). A considerable number of guitar methods dedicate attention to the subject of posture with the instrument and basic classical performance techniques providing comprehensive and systematic instruction. Such authors include: Ferdinando Carulli 'Méthode complète pour la guitare' (1810), Fernando Sor 'Méthode pour la guitare' (1830), Dionisio Aguado 'Escuela de Guitarra' (1825), Napoléon Coste 'Méthode complète pour la guitare' (1851), and Mauro Giuliani 'Studio per la Chitarra' (1812). The aforementioned works also illustrate the role of the guitar in the context of chamber music and orchestral music.

In the first half of the 20th century, the phenomenon of omitting the instrument in treatises that provide a comprehensive overview of orchestration continued to recur with great regularity. Occasionally, one may encounter brief references to the guitar or its incorporation into collective lists of unconventional instruments employed sporadically by composers. The following comment by Adam Carse precedes such a list:

[...] it were hardly exaggeration to assert that there is no European musical instrument of any sort which has not made either isolated or occasional appearances in some full score or other during that period<sup>15</sup>.

The work which initiated a paradigm shift in classical guitar was the article 'How to Write for the Guitar', written by Julian Bream, a renowned guitarist and proponent of new music. The author's objective is to provide a comprehensive characterisation of the instrument, offering a wealth of information and resources for composers who have not yet engaged with the guitar in their creative work. He identifies the structure and character of the sound as the most important element. Bream's position is that the guitar is more

suggestive and intimate than almost any other instrument, and therefore demands from the composer great imagination and feeling for colour<sup>16</sup>.

Subsequently, the author presents a concise overview of fundamental concepts pertaining to the scale, articulation, ornamentation, and elementary techniques. The analytical description is supplemented by subjective recommendations regarding specific compositional solutions. These include, for in-

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> A. Carse, *The History of Orchestration*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd., London 1925, p. 291.

<sup>16</sup> J. Bream, *How to Write for the Guitar*, 'The Score & I. M. A. Magazine' 1957, no. 19, p. 19.

stance, maintaining a considerable distance between the bass and tenor, avoiding the use of overly dense counterpoint, ensuring that the chordal accompaniment is kept in the first positions, and refraining from using the bass strings above the 12th fret<sup>17</sup>.

The end of the 20th century brings testimonies that paint a picture of the guitar as a flourishing instrument with great expressive potential. In his 1982 work, *The Study of Orchestration*, Samuel Adler provides a comprehensive account of guitar types, scale, tuning, and performance techniques, with a particular emphasis on natural harmonics<sup>18</sup>. He also makes reference to the 'amazing renaissance'<sup>19</sup> that the instrument is undergoing. It is particularly interesting, from the perspective of the contemporary guitarist, the description of the right-hand playing technique, whereby the strings are 'plucked with all five fingers of the right hand'<sup>20</sup>. In practice, the most common method involves the exclusion of the little finger when playing.

The second compendium that illustrates the flourishing evolution of the classical guitar and the enhanced appreciation of it at the beginning of the 21st century is John Schneider's work, 'The Contemporary Guitar'. The author provides a synthetic overview of the history of the instrument since 1800, a detailed description of the guitar's construction, as well as an examination of the relevant literature and contemporary performance devices. He notes with considerable enthusiasm that following the year 1960, there was a notable increase in the number of compositions using the solo guitar in both chamber and orchestral music<sup>21</sup>. This fact, when considered alongside the composers' use of creative innovation, resulted in the emergence of an entirely novel style. Schneider even suggests that the period can be described as 'the second Golden Age of the Guitar'<sup>22</sup>. Similarly to Bream, he highlights the significant impact of tone and colour on the instrument's distinctive qualities<sup>23</sup>.

The progression of the guitar and its perception in the musical community from the time of Berlioz to the present day can be symbolically illustrated by the juxtaposition of the 'Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes' with Stephen Dodgson's article 'Writing for the Guitar: Comments of a Non-Guitarist Composer'. In direct contradiction to the conclusions presented in the 1844 treatise, the British composer puts forth his own perspective:

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 19–26.

<sup>18</sup> S. Adler, *The Study of Orchestration*, ed. 3, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., USA 2002, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> J. Schneider, *The Contemporary Guitar (preface)*, University of California Press, USA 1985, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

The guitar seems to have the reputation among composers who do not play it of being difficult to write for well. The truth is that any composer who has developed a general instrumental confidence to a reasonably high level can perfectly well train his thoughts to encompass the fundamental character of guitar technique<sup>24</sup>.

### 3. The Concept of Idiomaticity in Music

#### 3.1. Attempts to Define the Characteristics of the Guitar Idiom

In such a dynamic field, the 21st century sees a plethora of studies focusing on the identity of the contemporary guitar and the instrumental idiom in general. The specificity of the issue of idiomaticity in music requires the establishment of a specific framework and, in effect, the creation of a new standard by which new music compositions can be evaluated.

Similarly to linguistic definitions, it is possible to define terms at varying degrees of subtlety within the field of musicology. The contemporary instrumental idiom is sometimes characterised as an extended set of performance features and techniques. This approach is limited to describing a range of techniques born out of the needs of contemporary compositional ingenuity. As stated by Seth F. Josel and Ming Tsao, these techniques encompass a range of approaches, including non-standard tuning methods (such as microtonal tuning), multiphonics (harmonics which generate multiple tones simultaneously), clusters, string bending, Bartók pizzicato, tapping, percussive effects, slide, or guitar preparation<sup>25</sup>. It is evident that an account of the techniques that extend the performance tradition represents a substantial effort to delineate the guitar idiom. After all,

[...] musical passages can be characterized as more or less idiomatic depending on the extent to which the music relies on instrument-specific effects<sup>26</sup>.

The most distinctive instrumental idioms exhibit distinctive features that are unique. One illustrative example is the utilisation of the sound of a ticking or chiming clock in Francis Kleyjnans' piece, 'A l'Aube du Dernier Jour'.

The concept of idiomaticity in music can be traced back to the theories of two researchers from other fields, biology, and psychology. Although separated by 57 years, Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *funktionale Tönung* and James Gibson's *theory of affordances* both speak of a situation in which an object evokes inherent, potential actions. The act of perceiving an object is accompanied by

<sup>24</sup> S. Dodgson, *Writing for the Guitar: Comments of a Non-Guitarist Composer*, „American String Teacher“ 1983, no. 33 (1), p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. S.F. Josel, M. Tsao, *The techniques of guitar playing*, Barenreiter, Germany 2014.

<sup>26</sup> D. Huron, J. Berec, op. cit., p. 103.

an immediate comprehension of its particular functions. This process is analogous to the way in which a bird is able to discern an arrangement of branches that offers an optimal foundation for a nest<sup>27</sup>.

Idiomatic properties may be regarded as potential, but it is also a common approach in musicology to define them as limitations<sup>28</sup>. The most evident and common example is the instrument's scale range. However, it is not merely the physical limitations that are beyond the capabilities of the guitar that are relevant in this context. As stated by Jonathan De Souza:

[...] Idiomatic music reflects what an instrument can and cannot do, what it does willingly and what it does reluctantly<sup>29</sup>.

As idiomatic features are often more nuanced than mimetic imitations of sound, such as a clock ticking, they can also be more challenging to identify with certainty. Nevertheless, their recognition is of particular significance as it facilitates an understanding of the author's creative methodology. Idiomatic features can provide a framework for interpreting a musical piece. For instance, it is of great significance to the performer to recognise that the guitar piece was influenced by the composer's proclivity for developing musical ideas on the piano<sup>30</sup>.

### 3.2. Correlation Between Difficulty and Idiomaticity

In the years following the aforementioned publication of Berlioz's opinion on the above-average difficulty of writing for the guitar, numerous authors, composers, and scholars have presented similar criticisms over the course of centuries. One of the most significant compositions of the 20th-century guitar canon, Albert Ginastera's Sonata Op. 47 was not completed until the composer's later years, ultimately representing his sole contribution to guitar music. The rationale behind his decision was his concern that he would be unable to satisfy the standards associated with the idiom<sup>31</sup>.

In the face of a challenge, composers may, on occasion, choose to compose uncomplicated and relatively 'safe' works to circumvent the idiomatic pitfalls.

Because accomplishing this typically involves using relatively basic textures that are indifferent to the full breadth of the guitar's said polyphonic and sustaining qualities, the musical result of such an approach is rarely effective and predictably mirrors what Berlioz references to when he speaks of things of "little sonorousness, and little effect." It would seem then that easy writing and idiomatic writing are then two very different entities<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 103–104.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> J.D. Souza, *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition*, Oxford Studies in Music Theory, Great Britain 2017, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. D. Huron, J. Berec, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. A. Ginastera, *Sonata for Guitar op. 47*, Boosey & Hawkes, Great Britain 1978.

<sup>32</sup> J. Godfrey, *Principles of idiomatic guitar writing*, Indiana University, USA 2013, p. VI.



The thesis is corroborated by the example of Joaquín Rodrigo's celebrated *Concierto de Aranjuez*, which comprises extended passages that, due to the nature of performance devices and demanding techniques, appear to be markedly non-idiomatic. Consequently, the piece is frequently modified by performers, yet it remains a seminal guitar composition inextricably linked with the instrument. Two conclusions can be drawn from the above observation. Firstly, the idiom does not merely boil down to performance elements or specific techniques, but refers primarily to character, general significance, spirit, and style of composition. Secondly, it is incorrect to assume that idiomaticity is equivalent to the selection of devices that are simple or even 'natural' within the context of the instrument in question. Rather, it can be defined as the

degree to which a given means of achieving a certain musical goal is significantly easier than other hypothetical means<sup>33</sup>.

The discussion on the aesthetic and idiomatic function of Joaquín Rodrigo's concerto can be concluded with the following words from Godfrey:

Aranjuez is perhaps the most recognized and celebrated piece of music for classical guitar in existence and is, to say the least, immensely more significant to the repertoire than the vast sea of trifles that make exquisite use of the idiom yet lack any real artistic substance<sup>34</sup>.

### 3.3. A Radical idiom

It would be beneficial to dedicate a separate section of the study on the semantic framework of the term *instrumental idiom* to the concept of the *radical idiom*. The concept was first proposed by Aaron Brooks in the field of improvisation. In terms of musical categorisation, he distinguishes between radical idiomatic guitar music and non-idiomatic guitar music<sup>35</sup>. This extreme case is seen by Brooks as the guitar tone and techniques that are marginal to other musical styles. This radicalisation entails a departure from the conventional aesthetics. However, the author points out that such music

[...] through its multi-layered musical structures which resist any single aural or analytical reading, and through its problematization of familiar instrumental vocabulary, is constantly in danger of incomprehension<sup>36</sup>.

One can therefore compare Aaron Brooks' idea to Witkacy's theory of pure form. Here, the idiom entails orienting guitar music programmatically towards

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<sup>33</sup> D. Huron, J. Berec, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> J. Godfrey, op. cit., pp. VIII–IX.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. A. Brooks, *A radical idiom: style and meaning in the guitar music of Derek Bailey and Richard Barrett and energy shapes, an original composition for electric guitar and electronic sounds*, University of Pittsburgh 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

the guitar itself, thereby capitalizing on its capacity to generate original structures and sound constructions.

### 3.4. Guitar Idiom: A Contemporary View

A detailed analysis of texts and statements by composers, musicologists and artists revealed the existence of three dominant approaches towards the idiom issue. These approaches used in contemporary discourse, but they emphasise different elements of the guitar's identity and characteristics.

The first approach can be described as 'traditional'. It is related to the style of Iberian and Latin American folklore and the classical techniques established during the golden age of the guitar. It is founded upon the tradition of 19th-century treatises by virtuoso composers, as well as the ways in which the instrument is used in flamenco and Latin American dances<sup>37</sup>. This 20th century approach to the guitar is largely inscribed in the collective consciousness through Andrés Segovia and the repertoire he popularised. Composers such as Isaac Albéniz, Enrique Granados, Francisco Tárrega, Federico Moreno Torroba, Joaquín Turina and Manuel María Ponce have gained widespread recognition, becoming reference points in guitar music literature<sup>38</sup>.

The aesthetic coherence of music with a stylistic focus and the sound of the instrument produces a very satisfying result. However, given the considerable uniformity of expression and the repetition of a specific set of performance techniques, over time a phenomenon described by Mark Pasiieczny as *guitar pathways* emerged<sup>39</sup>. This phrase, which is inherently pejorative and denotes a tendency 'to be predictable, boring, or repetitive'<sup>40</sup>, is seen here as the idiom. In this context, it is something that a composer seeking quality and originality should absolutely avoid. Such a one-sided interpretation of the idiom, which is nevertheless a common occurrence, represents a significant and unjustified limitation of the meaning of the concept. Composers tend to avoid a narrow, uni-dimensional idiomaticity, preferring instead to focus on guitar-specific qualities in a more general sense. In essence, this concept forms the foundation of Julian Bream's seminal and transformative artistic oeuvre<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. J.R. Alves, *The History of the Guitar: Its Origins and Evolution*, Marshall Digital Scholar, Huntington 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Andrés Segovia's discography; Source: <https://www.discogs.com/artist/392725-Andr%C3%A9s-Segovia>, [access: 15.07.2024].

<sup>39</sup> M. Pasiieczny, W. Gurgul, *Presja wystrzegania się gitarowych ścieżek*, 'Sześć Strun Świata' 2024, no. 2 (26), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. P.G. Davis, *For Julian Bream and his guitar, a fresh start*, 'The New York Times', 7.11.1980, p. 45.

An alternative approach to the guitar idiom emphasises a contemporary perspective. It begins with an enthusiastic observation on the value of new guitar music<sup>42</sup>, and proceeds to address the unprecedented situation in which a considerable number of composers who are not guitarists are creating works for the instrument.

This naturally leads to a shift away from the replication of patterns when it comes to performance devices. In contrast, the instrument's expressive potential becomes a primary focus, with the tone itself, its colour and articulation, becoming a central element in the analysis of idiomaticity. The words of Jonathan Godfrey in his treatise 'Principles of Idiomatic Guitar Writing' serve to illustrate this approach:

as a countless number of non-guitarist composers have now shown, the virtuous composer accesses these merits and rewards in his compositions not through an extensive understanding of the instrument's physicality, but rather an understanding of its sound and character – the true essence of idiomatic guitar writing. One can only hope that a perpetuated understanding of this concept will sooner rather than later make Berlioz's outlook viewed as nothing more than an antiquated notion from a bygone era<sup>43</sup>.

A composer, seeking an idiom in the described approach, also seeks to become proficient in the stylistic movement of the instrument. An idiomatic composition

[...] refers less to practical instrumental technique and more to musical styles and traditions<sup>44</sup>.

A third contemporary approach appears to seek to convey the essence of the guitar idiom through a detailed and accurate representation of the vast array of tonal possibilities that the instrument is capable of producing. This approach is based on a set of distinctive techniques and 'ready sequences'<sup>45</sup>, which are integral to the continually evolving performance practice of contemporary guitar music.

Such an interpretation also refers to the achievements of traditions that are nowadays associated with the instrument. An artist working within the idiom draws upon the existing corpus of work, incorporating extensive patterns into their own oeuvre. This interpretation is inherently subject to alteration over time, given its intrinsic connection to the behavioural patterns and proclivities of performers and composers<sup>46</sup>. Giovanni Albini develops this argument further, proposing that 'idiomaticity is not a binary nor an objective concept'<sup>47</sup>, but ra-

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. J. Schneider, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> J. Godfrey, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> A. Brooks, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> J.D. Souza, *Music at Hand...*, p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. J.D. Souza, *Fretboard transformations*, 'Journal of Music Theory' 2018, no. 62 (1).

<sup>47</sup> G. Albini, M. Oppizzi, *Composing idiomatic music for guitar using distant reading strategies*, 'Proceedings of The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2019 & 2021', 2023, p. 187.

ther refers to the individual knowledge and experience of each artist. The studied repertoire constructs an image of the idiom in the consciousness and is subsequently reproduced in the composer's later works.

From the classification of contemporary approaches to the guitar idiom proposed in this chapter, it becomes evident that there is a multitude of interpretations, which are often in contrast to one another. When faced with such a dynamically evolving term, the only way to grasp its essence is through a synthetic view. It is thus imperative to consider each of the aforementioned theses as indispensable to the formulation of a comprehensive and accurate account of the phenomenon of guitar idiomaticity.

#### **4. Analysis of selected excerpts from contemporary guitar compositions in terms of the idiom presence**

This chapter will present a selection of excerpts from works of particular relevance to contemporary guitar literature, with an accompanying analysis of these works in the context of the cited approaches regarding the issue of the instrument's idiomaticity. It should be noted that the objective of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of each individual work. Instead, it is to illustrate the impact of the synthetic definition of the idiom in a clear manner. The following discussion is therefore a case study, with the selection of examples based on the prevalence and distinctiveness of the phenomena in question.

##### **4.1. Michael Tippett's *The Blue Guitar*: III. *Dreaming***

*Dreaming*, the slow movement of the sonata by Michael Tippett (a non-guitarist composer) concludes the entire triptych in an unconventional way. The piece is rich in original harmonic and colouristic solutions, which demand that the performer execute legato articulation with precision and perform thirty-second note gestures with great lightness and airiness. The movement is founded upon a conceptual dualism, wherein impressionistic tonal passages are juxtaposed with energetic and dramatic recitatives.

The guitarist performing the piece is required to implement several solutions that correspond in a very distant way to the 'natural' techniques of playing the instrument. The 'impressionistic' theme is based on arpeggio patterns and is located in a register that generates the desired dark guitar tone (cf. fig. 1). These are very effective ways of using idiomatic features to perform runs that go beyond the traditional idiom.

However, *Dreaming* also features numerous solutions that are unnatural from the point of view of the guitar idiom. The dense, broken chord is intended

to be performed quickly and lightly in pianissimo dynamics, while ensuring that its subsequent components resonate. This presents a significant challenge, given the necessary alteration of position halfway through the progression. Additionally, the successions of triads are written in a non-idiomatic manner. This is due to the fact that, it is not possible to perform the required movements of the left hand between the strings in order to maintain strict legato (which is essential for the correct phrasing of the passage).

The image displays three staves of musical notation for a piece titled 'Impressionistic theme' by M. Tippett. The notation is in 3/4 time and features a complex sequence of chords and triads. The first staff begins with the tempo marking 'Very slow' and the dynamic 'pp'. It includes fingering numbers (1-4) and circled numbers (3, 4, 3, 2) indicating specific fingerings for the notes. The second staff is marked 'in tempo' and contains markings for 'CIV' and 'CVI' (likely referring to specific chords or positions), along with dynamic markings 'p' and 'pp'. The third staff continues the piece, featuring 'CVI rubato' and 'in tempo' markings, and ends with a 'p' dynamic. The notation includes various articulations, slurs, and fingering instructions throughout.

Fig. 1. 'Impressionistic theme', M. Tippett, *The Blue Guitar*, Schott and Co. Ltd, London 1984, p. 9.

On the one hand, it is reasonable to describe most of the performance devices in the quoted passage as physically feasible and derived from a long performance tradition, but the way in which the artistic idea is composed makes it impossible to fully present it through the sound of the guitar. The expressive potential of the instrument does not align with the structural organisation of the notes in the piece. Consequently, this piece can be classified as a non-idiomatic.

#### 4.2. Tilman Hoppstock's Variations on a Theme of Debussy

Similarly, Tilman Hoppstock's composition employs an impressionistic style, yet utilises a markedly different array of performance devices than those observed in *The Blue Guitar*. A preliminary analysis of the opening bars of the variation cycle (cf. fig. 2) indicates that the composer has a high level of familiarity with the instrument (in this case he is a guitar virtuoso). He uses it in an organic and highly imaginative manner.

Tilman Hoppstock  
(A. Willcocks)

Fig. 2. T. Hoppstock, *Variations on a theme of Debussy*, Prim-Musikverlag, Germany 2019, p. 2.

The combination of *arpeggio* with an ascending and descending *legato* in fast, repeated arpeggios creates the impression of chord continuity. Different position shifts enable the successive movement of the left hand's fingers in a seamless manner, without disrupting the narrative's continuity. Hoppstock employs an innovative approach by juxtaposing two traditional guitar techniques, arpeggio and legato, in order to fully capture the artistic conception of the shimmering tone that is characteristic of impressionism.

Thema - lento

Fig. 3. T. Hoppstock, *Variations on a theme of Debussy*, Prim-Musikverlag, Germany 2019, p. 4.

The variation theme, which follows the *Introduction* (cf. fig. 3), is a quotation from Claude Debussy's *Prelude 'Des pas sur la neige'*. Written in two systems, the three-voice texture is arranged for the guitar in a way that demonstrates the composer's mastery and knowledge of the instrument. The use of the harmonic on the fourth string allows for a long sounding pedal note that generates tension and release through interval relationships with the middle voice. Additionally, the natural guitar harmonics introduce an evocative quality to an exceptionally delicate passage. All voices are scored in the eighth and ninth positions, thus enabling the performer to guarantee that they are conducted with clarity. The ever-changing left hand's finger configurations on the neck represent a significant technical challenge for guitarists, yet the full artistic potential of this performance task can be realized.

*Variations on a Theme of Debussy* represents a stylistically innovative addition to the classical guitar repertoire. It is exceedingly rare to encounter other guitar works that make such consistent allusions to impressionism. The necessity to identify novel guitar tones prompted the composer to expand the expressive capabilities of his instrument of choice. The *Variations* provide an excellent illustration of a work that both extends the musical language and remains closely aligned with the intrinsic qualities of tone and expression associated with the guitar.

### 4.3. Elliott Carter's *Shard*

Elliott Carter, a New York-based modernist composer who did not play the guitar himself, composed two pieces for the instrument. The piece was created in 1997 and comprises a short, dynamically changing miniature-impression. It densely concentrates expressive means of performance and the implications of extreme contrasts in a small space.

Among the techniques artfully alluding to the guitar idiom, the frequent use of open strings is noteworthy (cf. fig. 4). Carter uses them to generate expressive movement and execute long leaps at a very fast pace. A concentrated left hand, coupled with a discernible texture, enables the performer to exercise complete control over the elements that define the style and musical language of the composition. These include punctualism, violent contrasts in dynamics, articulation, texture, and rhythm.

*Shard* provides an illustrative example of a piece that juxtaposes classical, distinctive guitar techniques (e.g. harmonics, rasgueado) with the potential resulting from the structural and characteristic properties of the instrument, including the utilisation of open strings, the introduction of rapid interval leaps within a single position, and the interweaving of single-voice passages that can be performed with apoyando articulation, with sections in which several spatial

sound planes are realised simultaneously. Consequently, Carter's miniature is notably idiomatic, yet throughout the piece, it consistently expands the expressive potential of the guitar.

for David Starobin  
**SHARD**

ELLIOTT CARTER  
(1997)

The musical score for 'SHARD' by Elliott Carter is presented in four staves. The first staff begins with a tempo marking of 108 and a dynamic of *f marc.*, followed by *meno* and *mf espr.*. The second staff starts at measure 4 with a tempo of 144, marked *f marc.*, then *p*, and *mp*. The third staff begins at measure 6 with *mf espr.* and *f*. The fourth staff starts at measure 9 with *(mf)* and *p*, concluding at measure 11 with *mf (marc.)*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 4. E. Carter, *Shard*, Hendon Music Inc. (Boosey & Hawkes), USA 1997, p. 1.

## Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned theories and the analysis of musical examples, it may seem that the concept of the guitar idiom is one that is open to a variety of interpretations, and that it is, in fact, ambiguous and contradictory. The current conceptual confusion surrounding this subject matter highlights the necessity for a comprehensive revision and the undertaking of new endeavours to elucidate the semantic framework of idiomaticity within the context of contemporary literature. The number of compositions employing the guitar in unconventional and innovative ways is growing rapidly. Each piece can be considered a contribution to the ongoing discourse on the potential and identity of the instrument, which is able to evoke a vast array of colours, shades, and forms of expression.



Nevertheless, there is a discernible set of performance devices that reappears in musical compositions and analytical texts, providing the foundation for subsequent developments. It is therefore reasonable to propose that the idiom is subject to a process of continuous development. The discrepancies that have emerged in the portrayal of contemporary perspectives on the subject (see chapter 3.4.) can be attributed to the selective emphasis placed on certain elements and the exclusion of other aspects in the discussion. The examples of works by T. Hoppstock and E. Carter demonstrate that there is a specific set of performance devices in contemporary compositions that can be characterised as idiomatic, drawing on elements from the existing definitions within the discourse.

In light of the initial proposition presented in the introduction to this article, it is pertinent to reiterate the question of the rationale behind the updating of a concept that is both problematic and elusive. Should the use of this term in the context of guitar music be abandoned in order to avoid any potential for misunderstanding? Not only is reflecting on the meaning of the idiom warranted (as shown by the review of the literature, there is no consensus on this topic), it is also very much needed. The frequency with which the concept of idiomaticity arises in spoken and written language demonstrates that it encompasses a significant range of meanings in the context of music. It is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of the defining characteristics that distinguish an instrument's identity. This understanding has the potential to facilitate the emergence of new avenues in the evolution of guitar literature and performance, and to exert a profound influence on the creative imagination of subsequent composers who, like Ginastera, initially channel their artistic visions through instruments with a more established idiom.

There are a number of themes that correlate with the subject matter discussed in the article. The aim was first and foremost to provide an initial structuring and put it in broad and diverse contexts. The guitar is a musical instrument that is undergoing rapid development in terms of both performance and musical literature. It is imperative that the discourse on its identity be reinforced just as dynamically and relentlessly.

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## Idiom gitary klasycznej – analiza pojęcia w kontekście wyzwiań współczesnego repertuaru

### Streszczenie

Określenie „idiom gitary klasycznej” szeroko stosowane jest w celu intuicyjnego sklasyfikowania zestawu cech kojarzonych z tym instrumentem. Funkcjonuje na zasadzie skrótu myślowego, a odnosi się do ogólnie pojętej specyfiki instrumentu. Intuicja często prowadzi w tym kontekście do korzeni iberyjskich oraz latynoamerykańskiej muzyki popularnej. Każda epoka przynosi jednak nowe zdobycze w zakresie praktyki wykonawczej oraz percepcji instrumentu, poszerzając definicję idiomu. Współczesne kompozycje wymagają ciągłej reewaluacji tego, co wydaje się „naturalne” i predestynowane do wykonania na gitarze. W niniejszym artykule autor prezentuje historię tworzenia się pojęcia „idiom gitarowy”; zestawia rozbieżne interpretacje znaczenia tego terminu; wskazuje czynniki konieczne w celu określenia kompozycji jako idiomatycznej; konstruuje syntetyczną definicję idiomatyczności oraz odpowiada na pytanie: czy wobec niezgodności interpretacji oraz ciągłego rozrastania się zakresu ram znaczeniowych idiomu gitarowego należy całkowicie porzucić jego zastosowanie? W tym celu zestawia spojrzenia współczesnych badaczy i artystów oraz dokonuje analizy kompozycji muzyki nowej, będących kamieniami milowymi w rozwoju idiomatycznego potencjału gitary.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gitara klasyczna, idiom gitary klasycznej, muzyka, estetyka muzyki.