

# The Baroque Guitar in Spain and the New World: A Journey Through History and Music

The Baroque guitar, an instrument of exceptional beauty and musical versatility, played a pivotal role in the development of Western music. Its origins can be traced back to Spain in the 16th century, where it quickly gained popularity as an accompaniment for both secular and sacred music.



## The Baroque Guitar in Spain and The New World

by Frank Koonce

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## Origins and Evolution in Spain

The earliest known Baroque guitars had four strings, but by the 17th century, five-string instruments became more common. These guitars featured a distinctive "waisted" body shape, with a narrower middle that allowed for greater resonance and projection.

In Spain, the Baroque guitar became an essential component of various musical genres, including the popular *villancico*, a type of Christmas carol. It was also used in chamber music and as a solo instrument in courtly settings.

## Characteristics of the Baroque Guitar

The Baroque guitar possessed several unique characteristics that distinguished it from earlier and later guitar types:

- **Smaller size:** The Baroque guitar was typically smaller than modern guitars, with a body length of around 27 inches.
- **Lower string tension:** The strings were strung with lower tension, producing a softer and more mellow sound.
- **Doubled courses:** The five strings were arranged in pairs, with the high E string doubled, creating a richer and fuller tone.
- **Movable bridge:** The bridge was movable, allowing for precise intonation and adjustment.

## The Baroque Guitar in the New World

As Spanish explorers and missionaries embarked on their journeys to the New World, they brought their music and instruments with them. The Baroque guitar quickly became a central part of musical life in the Americas, where it influenced the development of local musical traditions.

In Mexico, the Baroque guitar became known as the *vihuela* and was used extensively in religious ceremonies and popular songs. In Peru, it played a significant role in the emergence of the *huayno*, a traditional Andean folk dance.

## Renowned Composers

Numerous renowned composers contributed to the Baroque guitar's rich musical legacy, including:

- **Gaspar Sanz:** A Spanish composer and guitarist, Sanz published several collections of guitar music, including his influential "Instrucción de Música sobre la Guitarra Española" (1674).
- **Robert de Visée:** A French composer and lutenist, Visée composed numerous pieces for guitar and lute, blending elements of French and Spanish musical styles.
- **Santiago de Murcia:** A Spanish composer and guitarist, Murcia composed several works for Baroque guitar, including his "Passacalles por el Harpa Mayor" (1714).

## Legacy and Influence

The Baroque guitar left an indelible mark on the history of music. Its influence can be heard in the music of later periods, including the Classical and Romantic eras. Many contemporary guitarists and musicians continue to explore the Baroque guitar's unique sound and rich repertoire.

The Baroque guitar is a testament to the ingenuity and artistry of its creators. Its journey from Spain to the New World and its influence on a wide range of musical traditions make it an instrument of historical significance. By studying and performing Baroque guitar music, we can connect with the past and appreciate the timeless beauty and expressive power of this captivating instrument.



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