

The Guitar in America: Victorian Era to Jazz Age by Jeffrey J. Noonan. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

Book review by John Goodin

Dr. Jeffrey Noonan, Associate Professor of Music at Southeast Missouri State University, has written a remarkable book. The title however is problematic. This carefully researched and highly readable scholarly work is much more than merely a history of the guitar in the United States from the 1880s into the 1930s. Because the development of the guitar in this period is so closely tied to the tremendously popular BMG (Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar) movement Noonan's work provides us with good look at the history of the Golden Age of the mandolin orchestra as well.

Beginning with a brief survey of the guitar in the United States before 1880 the author then shows how the guitar slowly rose from being primarily an accompaniment instrument in mandolin and banjo ensembles to attain the status of a respected solo instrument suitable for serious classical music. The other side of this story, of course, is the failure of the mandolin, banjo, and BMG ensembles to reach that same level of legitimacy. In fact as the guitar rises in popularity through this period both the mandolin and the banjo fade. Noonan is a careful observer of this phenomenon and treats the mandolin and the world of its orchestras and virtuosi with real understanding.

In some ways the most valuable chapter of the book is chapter 2 which discusses in careful detail the various BMG periodicals (especially *S.S. Stewart's Banjo & Guitar Journal*, *Cadenza & Crescendo*). His history of these journals, and many shorter-lived BMG magazines, is fascinating reading. Noonan discusses both the personalities behind these periodicals and the economic and sociological factors that helped create and sustain the movement as a whole. Some of his ideas and theories may strike today's CMSA members as a little controversial. I, however, found it very interesting to see myself as a part of tradition of amateur music-making that is often very similar to that of our BMG predecessors.

The Guitar in America also tells the story of many extraordinary people. It was normal during this period for orchestra leaders and touring performers to teach all the ensemble instruments. So most of the guitarists that Noonan writes about also taught, and played, the mandolin as well. In particular, chapter 8, "The Wizard and the Grand Lady" is a wonderful discussion of the lives of the legendary William Foden and Ethel Lucretia Olcott (later known as Vahdah Olcott-Bickford).

Even though the guitar is its main focus, Dr. Noonan's book is easily one of the most important books ever written on the history of the mandolin, especially the "classical" mandolin, in the United States. I strongly encourage anyone with even a remote interest in the subject to seek out a copy and enjoy his fine writing and thorough scholarship. It seems to me that the author would also make a fine keynote speaker at a future CMSA conference.

(On the practical side, this book is currently only available in a \$50 hardcover edition. With luck the University Press of Mississippi will decide to issue a more affordable softcover version. Until that time I would recommend that interested readers ask their friendly local library to borrow a copy through interlibrary loan. WorldCat shows that at least 208 libraries own the book so it shouldn't be too difficult for your library to find a lender.)