

Notes on Vahdah Olcott-Bickford and the Founding of AGS

Ethel Lucretia Olcott was born on October 17, 1885 in Norwalk, Ohio, twenty miles south of Lake Erie. At the age of two she moved with her parents to Socorro, New Mexico. When she was three, the family moved to Los Angeles, California.

Olcott-Bickford began the study of guitar at the age of eight with a woman whom she described as having violet eyes and blonde hair. When nine years old, she met George C. Lindsey (1855-1943), a vendor of guitars and accessories, who was looking for a carriage house to rent for his spring wagon and horse. A conversation over the fence ensued and eventually little Lucretia played the guitar for him. A student-teacher friendship developed, which lasted until George Lindsey died in 1943. (See attached transcription of "La Golondrina" by VOB dedicated to G.C. Lindsey. VOB dedicated a number of her AGS transcriptions to him.) Mr. Lindsey was responsible for her meeting the renowned Manuel Ferrer (1828-1904)^[1]. Upon hearing her play, Ferrer invited her in 1903 to stay with his family in Berkeley, California, to receive tutoring every day. This episode in her life lasted for only a year due to the sudden death of Ferrer. Regardless, this period was a memorable one for Olcott, as Ferrer was one of the most distinguished resident guitarists in America and had established a clear world-wide reputation through his concerts and publications. (see attached G. Verdi transcription by Ferrer which he dedicated to VOB.)

Olcott-Bickford, now eighteen, returned to her parents' home in Los Angeles, where she published her first opus, "Theme for Variations on 'Nel cor piu non mi sento,'" a duo aria from L'Amor contrastato, better known as La Molinara, by Paisello, with Carl Fischer in 1905. She eventually went to New York in 1914, where she became involved in the musical and intellectual life and times of the period.

In New York she became known through her concerts and teaching of the guitar. She lived for a time with the famous Vanderbilt family at Biltmore, and tutored both Mrs. Vanderbilt and her daughter, Cornelia. At this time she also became involved with astrology, from which she derived her new name, Vahdah. She was Evangeline Adams's^[2] only assistant for nine years, until 1922. During this period she performed the Giuliani Concerto No. 3, op. 20 for terz guitar and orchestra. She also met Myron Bickford, organist, conductor, composer-musician and instrumentalist par excellence, and whom she married in 1915. In 1923 Vahdah and Zarh (Myron's astrological name) moved to Los Angeles and established residence at 2031 Holly Hill Terrace, after a brief stay on West Adams near downtown Los Angeles. In Zarh's words:

Vahdah Olcott-Bickford's arrival in Los Angeles marked the beginning of activities which led to the formation of what was first called the "Los Angeles Guitar Society." This was the first guitar society to appear in the United States. Inspired by the presence of such a well-known guitarist,

teacher and writer as Vahdah Olcott-Bickford, Mr. J. A. Larralde, a local guitar enthusiast, invited -- one day in September, 1923 -- a group of guitarists, teachers, students, etc., to come together at his office in the Los Angeles Stock Exchange Building to meet this new, vital personality. This gathering of 30 or 35 people, intended as an informal social function, evolved finally as the inauguration meeting of the Society. Vahdah Olcott Bickford quickly vetoed the rather arbitrary plans -- first presented -- of meeting weekly, playing and talking shop by saying she wouldn't be interested in such an aimless group. Her ambitious dynamism fired them all with the desire to take part in her plans for a definite educational program to promote interest in the classic guitar. She wanted to actively sponsor concerts, encourage composers to enrich the literature of the guitar and urge the sale of such literature in all music publications. The group unanimously and immediately appointed her Musical Director of the Society. Other officials elected on that occasion were George C. Lindsey (one of Vahdah's childhood teachers) as President and Zarh Bickford as Vice-President. In an effort to widen the scope of interest in the classic guitar, the name of the Society was changed to the "American Guitar Society" at Vahdah Bickford's suggestion. To help their promotion, Vahdah donated the proceeds from several of her concerts to establish a "Publication Fund" for the purpose of publishing superior works for the guitar. (Guitar Review, No. 23, June, 1959.)

[1]From Wikipedia: **Manuel Y. Ferrer** was regarded during his lifetime as one of America's finest virtuso guitarist. He was born in 1828 in San Antonio,Baja California (Mexico) of Spanish parents. As a young man he left his native town, traveling by stage and met a priest at mission Santa Barbara who was a skilled guitarist and gave him advanced instructions. Ferrer trained diligently, with the heightened enthusiasm that would gradually establishe his reputation in the musical world. In 1850 he moved to San Francisco, where his public debut took place at a guitar concert in the Metropolitan Theatre on September 18, 1854. Ferrer taught guitar and performed inSan Francisco for fifty years. His wife Jesusita de Vivar was also a musician, as were three of his ten children: Adele (guitar), Carmelita (mandolin), and Ricardo (violin). The family toured in the east in 1891, where they performed at the White House and the Vanderbilt mansion in New York. His public appearances as a guitar soloist, and also as a member of a guitar quartet, were very frequent in the San Francisco Bay Area. For several years he was conductor of the mandolin band, El Mandolinita. The music performed by this orchestra was solely Ferrer's compositions and arrangements. He published numerous pieces for guitar solo, but many of his works remained in manuscript. He taught the guitar up to the time of his death, which occurred very suddenly on June 1, 1904.

[2]From Wikipedia: **Evangeline Smith Adams**, (February 8, 1868 — November 10, 1932), was a well known late-19th / early 20th century American astrologer, based in New York. She ran a thriving astrological consulting business, gained widespread notability for successfully defending her astrological practice in court, and wrote a number of popular books about astrology. She has been described as "America's first astrological superstar".