

Guitar in Spain: Reflection

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My week in Spain was fulfilling and life-changing. I learned far more than I thought I would; I even acquired some critical life skills tangential to my primary focus of learning to play music on the classical guitar. I will attempt to summarize these many music/life lessons below.

Madrid taught me the value of silence and patience. I only had two days to explore the historic and vibrant city; in this short time I saw many of the city's cultural attractions by travelling on foot. I cultivated my ability to be patient in so many ways, from learned how to rely on an old-fashioned map when disastrously lost, to waiting for three hours in a seemingly deserted jazz club for a highly acclaimed jazz group to perform (it was definitely worth the wait).

I stayed at a nervous youth hostel in a northern neighborhood of Madrid for one night. Here I learned how far a simple smile or laugh can go. I modeled my behavior after Tess Helfrich '17. She has a gift of making others feel at ease in new environments. At dinner (an affordable, communal meal) I got to learn about the intentions and worldviews of travelers from Australia, the U.K., and Argentina.

I took an early train to Valencia so I would have time to meet Austin Williams '17 before the rest of the UTD Guitar Ensemble arrived. Austin and I enjoyed a small dinner near the train station. Austin shared some valuable tips from his first six weeks in Spain. Even though I'd only been in Spain for two days, meeting Austin and talking in American English helped alleviate some culture shock.

Once the rest of the UTD group had arrived, we departed for Gandia, where we would stay for the following six days for our educational experience. We took a beautiful hour-long train ride along the Mediterranean coast, enjoying a view of the mountains on one side and the

ocean on the other. We arrived in Gandia and checked into the spotless and affordable Hostal Ducal. The family-owned hotel felt like home.

The following day, we took an extensive personal tour of the Alhambra Guitars workshop near Alicante (~1 hour from Gandia). This tour was cordially arranged by Dr. Madriguera (who has played these world-renowned guitars and personally knows the founder of the company) and Suvanee Chirachanchai (who knows one of the company's managers). I am currently writing an essay on this eye-opening visit, which taught me just how much attention goes into creating one guitar (even an inexpensive student model) and exposed me to the many applications of physics and engineering in music. The visit culminated with a special "guitar tasting" opportunity, during which we were each able to test and compare some of Alhambra's finest guitars. I received Alhambra's guitar catalogues and contact information; in the following weeks I intend to cultivate a relationship between the manufacturers, the distributor, and Archie's Guitars, a Richardson-based guitar store that serves many UTD students. Archie's already provides discounts to students of the UTD Guitar Studies program; it is my hope that they can begin selling Alhambra student-model guitars at discounts to our students.

On Tuesday we began classes at the Gandia Conservatory. Every day, we attended five hour-long classes: classical guitar ensemble, private instruction, jazz ensemble/improvisation, lecture on history/culture of the guitar, and contemporary ensemble/improvisation. These classes were immersive and thoroughly enjoyable while demanding hard work from all of us.

The knowledgeable and caring faculty made the week fly by. Travelling with a group of UTD students/community members made my interactions with the faculty and Spanish students feel extra-special, as this dynamic allowed me to compare differences between Spanish and American culture in real time.

Plucking a guitar string produces an infinite number of notes. These notes are the harmonics of the string. Physicists perform a Fourier transform to figure out what the individual notes are; they are often interested in the loudest harmonics (which are usually the first five).

If my week in Spain could be represented by the plucking of a guitar string, then my experiences could be represented by the string's harmonics. The analogy implies that I learned an infinite number of things (it definitely feels like that). I will now perform a "Fourier transform" on the past week and will relate to you the "loudest harmonics" (the five most important things I have learned/realized).

Fundamental: Like energy, music cannot be created or destroyed. I believe that music was created when God said, "Let there be light," because light and sound can both be described using the exact same parameters: frequencies, amplitudes, and phases. The realization that I am not (even remotely) capable of creating music has made playing music a lot easier.

Octave: Every night of the week, we were treated to a performance featuring the Conservatory's faculty. I realized how many pieces for guitar end with beautiful, single notes. It is inspiring to see the amount of love a classical guitarist can put into such notes. Individual notes are such an easy way to describe life (as I am doing here), the universe (indeed, if we could travel in the dimension of time, all the information in the universe could be reduced to one note), and everything (if God created music, then shouldn't all things, even those we can't see, be musical?).

Fifth: Teachers can only show us things; it is up to us to be taught. So a good teacher is like (and sometimes is) a good musician, and a good student is like (and sometimes is) a music lover.

2nd octave: Life is a lot like the differential equation $y + y'' = 0$, whose solutions are sines and cosines (waves that never die). These are the cycles of hunger, hormones, moods, sleep, etc. that afflict all of us. The sooner we realize this, the sooner we can turn our lives into something that resembles $y - y'' = 0$, whose solutions are exponentials that peacefully converge at 0. Can you imagine the sound of a gong that never died away? It would be deafening! The beauty of a gong is in the way its sound fades; the beauty of life is the way we go from changing to changeless.

Major third: I was a bit sad to leave Dallas, even just for one week, because I miss my weekly commitments. I have recently been playing in a local church's worship band and have enjoyed hearing sermons on the Book of John. Something that has stuck with me is the encouragement that we "not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (John 3:18). To me, music is the perfect activity to catalyze my words/thoughts into actions. Indeed, music flows freely only when my heart is in the right place, the same criterion for me to live by actions and truth.

Spain was a magical place to have these many realizations and learn these many life-lessons. I am very thankful for the experience and hope to return someday!