

George Sakellariou Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives
50 Oak Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted September 20, 2014 and July 9, 2015
Marc Teicholz and Tessa Updike, Interviewers

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture throughout the past century.

George Sakellariou Interview

The first interview with George Sakellariou was conducted at his home in San Rafael, California on Saturday, September 20, 2014 by Marc Teicholz and Tessa Updike. The second interview was recorded in the Conservatory's archives at 50 Oak Street by Tessa Updike. The final transcript is based on the second interview. George's wife, Margarita, was present for both interviews.

Marc Teicholz

Marc Teicholz won first prize in the 1989 International Guitar Foundation of America competition. He has toured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Europe and Russia, receiving critical acclaim for his recitals and master classes. Teicholz also has toured Southeast Asia under the auspices of the U.S.I.A. Artistic Ambassador program and has appeared as a soloist with orchestras in Spain, Portugal, California and Hawaii. He currently records for Naxos and Sugo records. Teicholz graduated magna cum laude from Yale University and received an M.M. from the Yale School of Music and a J.D. from the Boalt School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley.

Tessa Updike

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Tessa holds a B.A. in visual arts and has her Masters in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives Management from Simmons College in Boston. Previously she has worked for the Harvard University Botany Libraries and Archives and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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George Sakellariou



George Sakellariou

George Sakellariou began playing the guitar at an early age in Athens, Greece. His first teacher was his brother, a talented composer of popular music. Sakellariou received his formal training from the Conservatoire of Music in Athens. After graduating with honors, he was invited to further his studies with the renowned guitarist Segovia when the great master heard him play.

Upon completion of his studies at the age of twenty, Sakellariou joined the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where he became chairman of the Guitar Department. There he taught his style of playing, with emphasis on clear tone and smooth lyrical lines, combined with a precise, strong sense of rhythm.

Mr. Sakellariou has performed around the world in concert halls from the Kennedy Center, and other major halls in the United States, to Singapore, Hong Kong, Turkey, Heidelberg, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Montevideo, Toronto, Calgary, Taipei, Osaka, and others. At the Toronto Festival he performed the Leo Brouwer Guitar Concerto for the guitar and orchestra with Leo Brouwer conducting. This performance was considered an incredible feat because he replaced guitarist John Williams on short notice. He has made many radio and television appearances including BBC, PBS and Radio France. Several extensive and impressive articles about Mr. Sakellariou have been published in internationally renowned *Guitar Player* magazine.

Hear George play Toccata by Bach: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwF6DO9I7Sw>

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Early Years

I was born in Athens, Greece, May 2, 1944. I was the youngest of eight children. My older brothers all played an instrument – they played guitar, and accordion. I was raised in a very musical environment. My brothers also had a lot of friends who were musicians. So I was accustomed to listening to live music when I was very, very little. I remember the excitement that I felt every time I would hear an instrument – the accordion, or a saxophone, or a violin – live, would give me a certain thrill. So by the time I was five, one of my older brothers noticed that I was very interested in the guitar, that I would pick up the instrument and try to imitate the positions of other people playing the guitar. I started playing when I was about five, and since then I've never stopped.

I was fortunate that we had some very good teachers in Athens – in my neighborhood, as a matter of fact. So I was introduced to proper technique. I remember studying the Carulli method, and the studies of Aguado very early. That really gave me a very strong basis. Eventually I went to the Conservatory of Music in Athens, where I studied in my teen years. I had a wonderful teacher, Ch. Ekmetsoglou. I graduated when I was eighteen years old from the Conservatory.

California – Segovia Master Class

After that I really wanted to go to the States, and I had a brother who lived in San Francisco. Through him, I arrived in San Francisco in 1963. In 1964, the great master Andre Segovia gave a masterclass at the University of California, Berkeley. When I found out about it, I was very excited. I wanted to go to the class, but I found out about it very late. As a matter of fact, only about a day or two before the start of the class. I went to the very first session of the class, and during the intermission I approached the master Segovia, and I introduced myself. I told him who I was, and where I had studied. He invited me to his hotel – he said, “Come to my hotel at six o'clock.” So at six o'clock, having borrowed a guitar from a fellow guitarist I had just met, I went to his hotel. There were about four or five other guitarists with guitars ready to audition for Segovia! But I wasn't very nervous to play for Segovia, because really the only thing I wanted was to play for him. Not so much that he was going to accept me as a pupil, but I was so excited to be in his presence and to play for him. So I played – he was very gracious to me, very nice. After that, of course, he accepted me as a pupil. It was a very exciting time for me to be in his presence every day, and to hear him pick up the guitar and demonstrate something close up – where I could hear his beautiful tone qualities. Again, that was a very important point in my life as far as the guitar is concerned.

Andrés Segovia was quite an interesting individual. He, without any doubt, fought very hard to convince people that the guitar can be played in a large hall. Most people before Segovia thought it was a crazy idea to have the guitar in a large hall – including guitarists like Miguel Llobet, a

wonderful guitarist – he didn't really think that was possible. Segovia was a strong personality, and the way he fought hard – as far as I know he was the first guitarist to play in these vast halls, and still project the guitar beautifully. As Stravinsky said, "Segovia's guitar is soft, but you can hear it far." I mentioned earlier that starting to teach when I was twenty, and teaching for so many years – I learned a lot how to communicate these ideas, these principles – the tone, the technique – to communicate to the student in a way that he could understand it. I feel that Segovia really never taught. He would do a masterclass every few years, but you're talking about teaching six, seven hours a day, and having so many different examples of students, and different problems you would have to solve. So was he a great teacher? Well, I really didn't try to judge him in any way, but the best thing that he could do for me was pick up a guitar and demonstrate it, and from that I would learn much more than from the comments he would make in the class. In addition to that, in the masterclass, being nineteen years old and having three-hundred people in the audience – and I'm the first one he pulled out to play. I was so nervous, half the time I don't think I was able to absorb any comments he would make. I was just trying to make it through!

But when I saw him privately at the Drake Hotel in Chicago – he was there for a week and he was wonderful to invite me to Chicago. So I went, and I stayed with some relatives who lived in Chicago. I saw him at the hotel, just he and I. There he was very different, he was really precise and the suggestions and comments that he made to me in the private session was far greater than the masterclass. Because there, as opposed to the masterclass, he didn't have the audience – it wasn't his show. Being with him privately in Chicago, he was very precise. He would take the piece and say, "Why don't you dampen this note, or hold this note a little bit longer? Put your thumb across this string to stop the vibration." He was definitely very helpful, one on one.

San Francisco Conservatory of Music

I believe that having been accepted by Segovia was also instrumental – very important for to entering the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. It was then that I was introduced to Dr. Laufer [SFCM Director from 1957-1966]. I went to his office, we had a meeting, and after that I started to teach the Preparatory Department, the adult section, and gradually developed the undergraduate program. That was in the fall of 1964. I taught quite a lot, and I had some wonderful students. I particularly liked teaching the younger students. I believe the Preparatory Department is extremely important because what you teach to someone who is ten or eleven years old is so important. They are fast learners, and are able to absorb everything very, very well. That was for me wonderful to be at the Conservatory and to be surrounded by so much talent. And being around many artists ... people like the composer John Adams, and George Duke, the wonderful jazz pianist – a wonderful person. Right about that time – 1967 – is when Margarita and I were dating and got married.

Teaching at the Conservatory, and starting to teach so early, when I was twenty, I learned so much. Teaching – you have to develop the ability to be able to communicate your ideas in a way that the students can absorb it and can apply it. But I’ve always felt that I had to base my whole approach on playing the guitar on music, and connect it to singing. Whenever I had any doubt about anything, I would just have the student sing the passage and try to emulate through the guitar exactly that feeling – that lyrical feeling – that I believe is important in music.

Guitar Repertoire

As far as repertoire, the guitar repertoire sometimes people say is not wide enough, or not enough – I think there’s plenty of music for the guitar. And some absolutely wonderful music! Anything from transcriptions of early music, like Bach or Scarlatti – to contemporary works by Leo Brouwer and other composers. In teaching the different compositions, or different styles, I always try to find the common denominator. Whether it’s Bach, or whether it’s a contemporary composition, I’ve always believed that we have to have certain principles correct. You have to get the music, read it correctly, follow the rhythm exactly the way it is – before you try to make any changes, make sure that you know it fairly well. I always try to teach a student how to take a piece from the very start, and how to go through the process of bringing it to a performance level. That is a very long process. It can be exciting, or it can be tedious. But if a student can learn what it takes – how many hours of practice, how many repetitions, how many changes one will have to make in fingerings, in order to achieve the musical quality that we want – if the student learns that – wow! Then he is fearless. He can do anything. In my teaching, I’ve always tried to do that – to make the student understand that it’s not an easy thing that you’re just going to read through it – no, you have to analyze it, break it up, cement it in your brain firmly before you’re able to sit down in front of an audience and perform it. Even at that point, performing the first time, it might not be so good. You may make some errors, or some weaknesses might appear under the pressure.

Performing again, as I mentioned, is something that one has to be very well prepared before one sits in front of an audience. Otherwise, the result could be quite traumatic, and the effects can last for years after that!

Family

I mentioned that I got married in 1967 to Margarita, who was born in Colombia – an American mother, a Colombian father. We’ve been together now close to 50 years, 48. I’m very fortunate because she’s a music lover – she loves the guitar. When I practice, I like to practice in the house in an area where she can hear me. It is really wonderful to have somebody with a great ear listening to me while I’m playing. She’s never complained about me playing – always says “Oh, it’s wonderful!” So, no problem. Her suggestions are wonderful, she’s straight-forward. I’ve

always felt that getting married to Margarita was a good move from a musical point of view. I remember when we were dating, my mother was living in California at that time – she had come from Greece. Everywhere we'd go, I would take my mother along. So everybody thought that I was a momma's boy! Of course I was a momma's boy, but my mother would love to go to my performances. She was so proud, and people would go up to her and congratulate her. So I would always bring her along, no matter what. We have four children, and now we have many grandchildren. Having a family and going through all that – I believe it's very good for the music, for your inner self, life and such. You have to be able to take the interruptions. You have to be flexible. I learned how to concentrate even if a lot of noise is going on – if a baby's crying, no problem! I can practice. It has worked very, very well. It's wonderful.

Performing

I believe that in order to play in a musical way, it's important to have an inner peace inside you. Not to have any type of negative feelings for individuals, or negative feelings about anybody. You just have to be positive, and look at the audience as people who are friends, who are music lovers – they are there to enjoy the moment. The moment you can have that serene feeling inside you, I believe that you'll be free to interpret the music, and play, in a wonderful way.

For guitars – a lot of people are always trying to find the perfect instrument. It's wonderful to have an instrument that's easy to play, that sounds good, but the most important part is what you do with the instrument. If you can produce a beautiful sound with a not very good instrument, then imagine how wonderful it would be to have a fantastic instrument – your sound would be fantastic, it would be wonderful! But I've heard great instruments played by people who did not have a sense of tone quality, and would make those instruments sound really, really bad.

There are certain things that are happening in today's age, with all the computers and the high tech equipment. I see guitars with a tuner on top of their fingerboards. They look at the arrow to show them if the string is tuned. I always tell my students to avoid that – I always say, "Have a tuning fork, or have one note...." Because tuning an instrument is an art in itself. If you don't do it all the time, you're not going to be good at it. I say to my students, "OK, sometimes you have a guitar, and you don't have that darn tuner! What are you going to do? You're not going to tune it?" If somebody wants to use them, that's fine. But as a general rule, I say, don't do it. It's a wonderful thing to have the ability to quickly tune an instrument.

Of course through the years that I've been playing and performing, I remember I received a phone call one time from the San Francisco Ballet. Lew Christensen, the Director of the Ballet at the time had written a ballet called *Don Juan*, based on the *Concerto de Arajez* and the *Fastasia para un Gentilhombre* by Rodrigo. So there were two concerti, and he created this beautiful ballet called *Don Juan*. Lew Christensen called me – as a matter of fact, at the Conservatory.

That was about 1973. He asked me if I would be willing to perform for the Ballet. I said, "Let's meet." We got together at the Conservatory on 19th Avenue, and I played for him through both pieces. Immediately he was so excited, and I performed in 1974 and 1976 about eight performances of those two concerti for *Don Juan*. It was absolutely beautiful work, fantastic. It was then that I received that beautiful little comment from Herb Caen, the legendary columnist in San Francisco. He mentioned, "What talent lurks in the city." Of course it was another great moment when I performed for Steve Jobs at Yosemite in the Ahwahnee Hotel. He was a wonderful guitar lover, and music lover. I remember when he selected the program I was going to play – one of the pieces was *Cordoba* by Albéniz. He had tears in eyes just listening to me, in his home.

Touring

I had a concert at the University of Montana in Bozeman, and I had a very strong fiberglass case for my guitar. The plane that I took went from San Francisco to Salt Lake City to Bozeman – but the plane from Salt Lake City to Bozeman was very small. Even though my guitar was supposed to be on the plane, it didn't make it! So I arrived at ten in the morning, no guitar. They told me that the next flight from Salt Lake City was nine o'clock at night – way after my concert had started. So I went to a music store in Bozeman, and they had this \$500 guitar on sale for about \$350. I explained to them, and they were very nice and loaned it to me. I gave the concert, it went very well. At the end of the performance I mentioned the shop, and I mentioned the guitar, and I understand that the next day the guitar was immediately purchased – it was sold immediately.

I remember another time Margarita and I were flying to Brazil – to Rio de Janeiro – for a Villa-Lobos festival. This was in the '80s, and we had little children – it was very hard to leave the house. So we were at the San Francisco airport getting ready to fly to Brazil, and as I'm getting the suitcase and guitar out of the car, something went wrong and I broke my thumbnail off completely. I had many concerts – I had concerts in Medellín in Colombia, and other places after Brazil. I was very upset. On the plane, Margarita noticed that I was so upset, and she said to me, "I have an idea when we get there." So we got to Brazil, and Margarita had a thumbnail that was quite long. So she cut it, and we glued it on my thumbnail, and I performed – it sounded even better than mine! She saved the day.

This was another situation when she saved me – I think about ten years ago I had a tour of concerts in Chile. I was performing in southern Chile, near a city called Puerto Varas. It was a beautiful event, a lovely hall. The flowers, and everything was absolutely perfect. About five PM, a few hours before the concert, I went to the hall to check the acoustics and everything. I opened my guitar, and the first string was broken. Well, that never happens – the nylon string never breaks! So I put another one on, started to play, it breaks again! OK, that's a problem now.

Something is breaking the string. It was a new guitar. I was very upset. We came back to the hotel, and I didn't know what to do – what do I do? I was very upset about it, and when you're upset, you stop thinking. Margarita, in her very relaxed, sane approach, said, "I have an idea. Will you let me try it?" I said, "Sure, I'll try anything." She said, "I noticed that the string is breaking at the bridge. There's something there that's breaking the string." She said, "Can I borrow one of your bass strings – wound strings?" So I gave her a bass string, she fed the string through the little hole at the bridge. And she started to use it as a file. She said, "I can feel where it's sharp, I can feel it!" She started to file it, until it was smooth, put the nylon string on, it never broke again. That was it, she saved the day! She said to me afterwards, "George, when you had that problem before the concert, how much were you willing to spend to solve it?" I said, "Several thousand dollars." She said, "I don't want anything, but just remember it!" The important thing is to always be calm, and approach everything in a calm way.

I also performed many times for the Carmel Bach Festival, I was a regular there for many years. That was also a lot of fun. Of course I performed for many guitar festivals – the Toronto Festival, the Carmel Festival, and others. Every performance, whether it is at the Kennedy Center, where I played, or a small town in Challis, Idaho and Custer County – the whole town came to my performance! I approach every performance, whether it is for a small group of people to a large group of people, the same way. You do your very best, and you try to play everything the best way possible. I do enjoy performing, but you have to be prepared properly and you have to accept that we are human beings, and sometimes your level of tension can be different. You wake up one day, and you feel completely relaxed ... other times you feel a little bit more tense. Margarita noticed that sometimes after I would drink two or three espressos I would be a little jittery, so I never, ever drink coffee before a performance – absolutely not!

Also, since I was a teenager, I knew deep inside that I should avoid any type of alcohol, or anything that would affect my concentration and the ability to be in control of all of these notes that we have to play. From that point of view, I have to be thankful to my family, because my brother, who was my first teacher, also taught me "Don't smoke, don't do anything like that." So I believe that it's very important to maintain consistency, to maintain a certain level. If you drink too much, or you do other things that affect the way you think, you're not going to be consistent. That was, I believe for me, very important.

Advice to Young Guitarists

I think it's important to develop good habits, from the start. To develop the ability to know what you have to do in order to learn a piece from A all the way to Z – to be able to master the piece. That can be a very long process. At the same time, some people may assume that study and exercises can be boring, but I always try to work on exercises for a short period of time that give great results. So when I was a teenager, I loved to practice scales, and developed a speed,

keeping a record with a metronome, as to how fast I would go the week before, the month before, and I believe that helped very much. I do have a series of exercises that strengthen the hands – bar exercises, slur exercises, and I work very hard – but not for many hours. I can practice exercises for about fifteen minutes and they give great results. The other thing is that I don't like to practice anything that I don't like. Sometimes there are situations where people say that a particular piece is a "masterpiece"! Written by this famous composer – maybe that's the only piece he wrote for guitar – but if it doesn't touch me, if I don't feel anything playing it, I might dedicate a certain amount of time but it won't be enough to master that piece, unless you really love it. So for me, choosing the repertoire is very important; to always be true to yourself, always choose pieces that you enjoy practicing, that you can practice day after day, knowing that the amount of time it will take to master that piece, it won't drive you nuts! That's very important. And at all times, keeping the certain basic principles of music – keeping the rhythm strong, keeping a good balance – make sure that the basses come out. Sometimes people overlook the basses, I like to hear a rich bass when I play – so to train your ear while you're playing to listen to the melodic line, the middle line, everything – you have to be in total control. And that takes practice, to get your ear to be so thorough while you play. Sometimes, including myself, it's easy to get so involved in your practice where there's a little weakness in the piece, you can make it up in your mind and it takes somebody like Margarita to say, "Well, that note wasn't loud enough." ... "Oh! Thank you!" We have to learn to carefully listen objectively to our playing while we play, and that is not easy at times.

Another thing is that the guitar is a very sensitive instrument, and at times the strings can make a lot of noise. Nowadays, with recordings and microphones, you can often hear whistling, and noises that shouldn't be there. You hear it, and the way I always try to reduce that noise, is during the process of learning a piece – the early, early stages – I try to put the proper fingerings on it. If I hear anything that sounds like a squeaky noise, or a string noise, I stop and investigate – which finger is actually doing that? I correct it right there and then. I do not wait until I know the piece well to do it. That has to be part of the early learning process of a piece.

Looking Back

Having reached this wonderful age of becoming a septuagenarian, it is something kind of magical. When I was nineteen, twenty years old, the idea of reaching this age was almost a frightening thing. But it's wonderful because, first of all, having accomplished what I've accomplished with a wonderful family and a wonderful home – the children, grandchildren, all the dogs that we've had – the beautiful thing about reaching this age is that you can look back at all the different stages of development and maturity. Even though I've always enjoyed playing, and I listen to myself playing recordings that I did thirty years ago – some things I like very much, some things I don't like at all. Now, I have this serene feeling inside me, where I like where I am, I like the fact that my fingers still work, and I can play, and I can play in a way that I

enjoy and that Margarita enjoys. For me, if I do something that my wife likes, I am perfectly satisfied! I do recordings still, I do videos. The main reason is that our grandchildren love it! They go, and listen to it, and they're proud and can show off to their friends – "That's my grandfather!" All of that is wonderful. But the experience of reaching a point where clearly what you have to do – it's impossible to know all of that when you're eighteen, nineteen, twenty. I'm very much at peace, and I love where I am. My fingers keep working OK – fine. I don't expect at ninety to do a whole bunch of scales, but if I can breathe, that's great! I remember I saw an interview of a wonderful guitarist, Les Paul, and in this interview he was in his late eighties. He played guitar through his seventies and eighties, but he said that when you reach a certain age, there are certain things that you just cannot do – but you have your experience and can figure out another way of doing it! So you keep going, you find another way. And then eventually, he said, you run out of ways, and you have no way of doing it. So this is the stage that I'm starting right now. Everything is working, but we go month by month. I'm enjoying very much playing, and I practice every day. I practice my exercises, scales, and as long as my fingers are working I'll keep playing. I have some performances coming up – I obviously enjoy performing here and there.