

CLASSICAL GUITAR



FIGURE 1. Madame Sidney Pratten as she appears on the front page of the *Guitar School* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1859).

‘Delicate sweetness and sympathetic tones’: Madam Sidney Pratten and her Guitar School (1859)

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Introduction

The title of this article is taken from the opening remarks on the merits of playing the guitar in Madame Sidney Pratten’s *Guitar School*, a remarkable pedagogical publication that embodies the spirit of mid-Romantic salon style in England. As important as the publication is the author herself, Madame Pratten, who challenged established rules of femininity in a patriarchal society and became a leading performer, composer, and teacher in Victorian England.

In the Nineteenth Century the guitar was one of the few instruments considered suitable for young women.¹ Women learned to sing and play the instrument to entertain guests as part of their civic education. Firm social boundaries prevented women from pursuing professional aspirations.² Pratten

is one of the few women to break this barrier and leave a vast artistic legacy in the form of didactic publications, concert works and a unique concert career documented by the leading journals of the day. Despite this her contributions remain underappreciated.

What follows, then, is a brief overview of her life and career and a descriptive analysis of a major pedagogical work written at the height of her creative powers.

Madam Sidney Pratten

Madam Sidney Pratten was born as Catharina Josepha Pelzer in Mulheim, Germany in 1821. Catharina’s natural talent for the guitar was developed by her father, Ferdinand Pelzer (1801-1861), a noted German guitarist, pedagogue and guitar enthusiast who published the instrument’s first journal, the

Giulianad. By the age of seven Catharina was touring continental cities as a prodigy. Her family settled in London in 1830 where she encountered some of the well-known guitar personalities of the age, including the young Giulio Regondi (1822-1872), with whom she performed occasionally as a duo partner and maintained a lifelong friendship.

In 1842, the Pelzers relocated from London to Exeter. Catharina began teaching the guitar in 1849 following Ferdinand’s permanent return to London. Her own return to London society concerts was made possible in part by the support of Lady John Somerset, who provided a space for lessons and intimate salon performances.³

After her marriage to the flutist and composer Robert Sidney Pratten (1824-1868) in 1854,

¹ Lindmaier, Hannah, ‘Die Gitarre – ein „Fraueninstrument“ des 19. Jahrhunderts? Handlungsspielräume von Gitarristinnen am Beispiel von Catharina Josepha Pratten’. *Phoibos* (2016): 133

² Britton, Andrew, *The Guitar in the Romantic Period: its musical and social development, with special referenceto Bristol and Bath* (PhD Diss., London: Royal Holloway College, University of London, 2010): 106

³ Weber, William, *The Musician as Entrepreneur, 1700-1914: Managers, Charlatans, and Idealists*, (Bloomington): Indiana University Press, 2004): 211

Catharina began to perform and compose under the professional name Madame Sidney Pratten. The two appeared often as a flute and guitar duo and continued to gain valuable contacts in British aristocratic circles from which Madame Pratten drew a considerable amount of students. Following Robert's death in early 1868, Madame Pratten continued to perform and by practical necessity also expanded her activities as a teacher. Perhaps in emulation of the woman that named the age, Pratten began wearing mournful black for many years after Robert's passing.⁴

In the 1870's Pratten's performance career flourished. On May 17, 1871 she played Mauro Giuliani's Concerto No. 3 in F major, accompanied on the piano by the composer's niece. In 1873 she performed an accompaniment in a choir concert conducted by Charles Gounod.⁵

Following the model of Regondi she also devoted herself to other instruments popular in the Victorian salons: the concertina and the Gigelira, a kind of xylophone. Beginning in the 1860s she turned to composition and wrote nearly 200 works, including some pieces for concertina and Gigelira, most of which are dedicated to her students.

Pratten's guitar playing was consistently praised by contemporary press coverage. The *Athenæum*

writes that she was: «an extremely accomplished operator on the 'organ of Spain'. The charming way with which she told the story of her own compositions as she played them quite captivated her audience, and the applause which greeted her every movement was very hearty. It was a remarkably successful and pleasant recital.»⁶

Pratten's thoughts on guitar playing were formalized in the *Guitar School*, which combines technical exercises with studies by Fernando Sor, Mauro Giuliani and other composers. The method also includes sections on issues related to expressive performance practice such as ornamentation, a scheme for producing varied and distinctive colors on the strings, passages on vibrato, rubato and other valuable information. Many of her musical symbols have no precedent in guitar scores of the time.

While the *Guitar School* was a landmark publication for the instrument in England it turned out to be too demanding for beginners. Pratten's follow-up publication, *Learning the Guitar Simplified*, was an unmitigated success and appeared in twelve editions during her lifetime. She also wrote an instruction manual for the guitar tuned to E major, a popular scordatura of the time.

Pratten continued to combine her work as a concert guitarist, teacher and composer until an

advanced age. She made her last public appearance in 1892 at the age of 70 in a recital of her own works. The *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review* described the evening as: «A large audience assembled to enjoy a pleasing program. The talented entrepreneur was in excellent shape and rendered her solos with her usual charm and brilliancy. Madame Sidney Pratten played numerous morceaux, all from her own pen.»⁷

Pratten passed away in London on October 10, 1895 after a brief illness. She had no children but was survived by two musical siblings: Giulia Pelzer (1837-1938-) guitarist and music teacher, who accompanied her throughout her life and continued her work after her death and Anne W. Pelzer, who played the concertina and the piano and was also an able composer.

Factors that contributed to Madame Pratten's success include her novelty as a female virtuoso, her high social standing among London's aristocratic salon culture, and the perception that the guitar was an appropriate instrument suited for young ladies. Pratten certainly maximized her career by using her connections in concert advertisements and announcements. Pratten can be regarded as an exceptional phenomenon because of her extensive activities as a guitarist and the professionalism with which she pursued her teaching career.⁸ Her compositions often

⁴ Harrison, Frank Mott, *Reminiscences of Madame Sidney Pratten. Guitariste and Composer* (Bournemouth, 1899): 13

⁵ Harrison: 36

⁶ *Athenæum*, June 1873, No. 2383: 832

⁷ Harrison: 58

⁸ Weber: 211

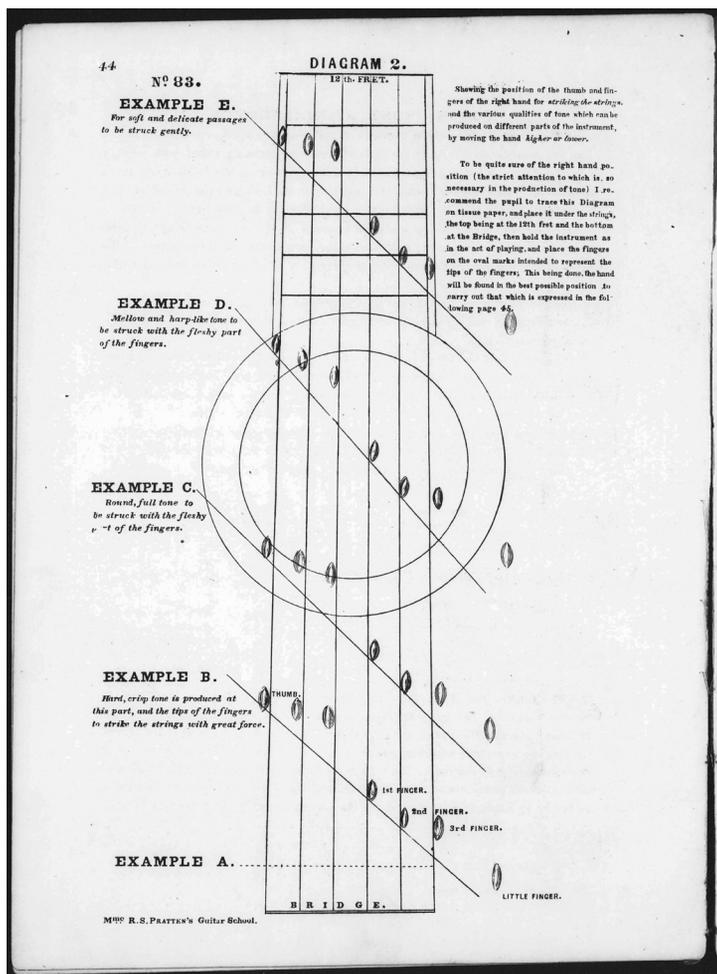


FIGURE 2. Pratten's diagram from the *Guitar School* showing the relative position of the Right Hand for expressive playing through the use of color.

forgo obvious virtuosity in favor of expressive, reflective lyricism. Her scores are a deliberate and successful recreation of these nuances and await rediscovery as the 200th anniversary of her birth approaches.

The Guitar School

The teaching of the guitar in England during the 19th century was an activity practiced by both men and women. Magazines like *The Musical World* or *The Athenaeum* include many advertisements by women who offered guitar lessons.⁹ The earliest English methods

were written by foreigners: Felice Chabran, Charles Sola, Pablo Rosquellas and Catharina's father, Ferdinand.¹⁰

Catharina Pratten herself worked as a guitar teacher for about fifty years. She began this activity in Exeter in the 1840s, and after moving to London made a name for herself as a teacher of aristocratic or upper middle-class girls and women. The preference for the wealthy and connected was not accidental. Pratten sought to establish an image of «prestige» within a society governed by strict hierarchal patterns of behavior and etiquette. Educational work can be considered as her main activity beginning in the 1850s, as it was probably her biggest source of income.

Though she published several instruction manuals, Madam Sidney Pratten's *Guitar School* must be considered her major contribution in the field of guitar pedagogy. Brought out by Boosey and Hawkes in 1859, the school synthesizes the common features of the era's guitar manuals and introduces several original notational tools and practice formulas. It puts equal emphasis on technical skill and expressive development suggesting that Pratten's teaching focused on holistic musical growth.

Though not gender specific, the manual's approach to repertoire and manner of linking short solo works with sentimental songs and ballads was certainly an intentional targeting decision by the savvy and class conscious Pratten. Her image on the front

⁹ Lindmaier: 148

¹⁰ Button, Stewart, 'The teaching of the guitar in England during the 19th century' <http://theguitar-blog.com/?p=401> (accessed 1 August 2018)

piece of the publication gazing soulfully into the distance may well have been an idealization of the accomplished and cultured young woman of the age (Fig. 1). In that it differed from her father's educational treatise *Music for the People* (1842), which embraced music education for the masses.

Description

Although there is no formal division of the manual into chapters there are clear segments that form specific areas of study. What follows is a description of the manual's six major sections:

Section I

The first section of the School opens with a customary ode to the instrument, lauding its qualities over other instruments. Pratten offers two methods of tuning: (1) by comparing the open strings to the notes of the piano, and (2) by tuning in unisons at the fifth fret. The rest of the section is devoted to concise articles about expressive devices: color effects, *glissè*, slurs, harmonics, arpeggios, dashes, nails, twirls, tremolo, vibrato, *tambora*, *etouffè*, shakes (trills), and *corni*.

Pratten's concepts of "twirls" correspond roughly to the modern concept of *rasgueado*. The term "dash" refers to a harp-like sweep of the thumb and pointer finger up and down the strings.

Section II

The second section opens with an elegant fingering chart followed by advice on how to hold the instrument. This is one of the few areas where Pratten is directly addressing a female readership. Her recommendation "for a lady is to place the left foot on a foot-stool about nine inches in height, and allow the instrument

to rest on the lap."

After giving several right hand exercises Pratten adopts a formula that is repeated in the most common major and minor keys used in guitar music: C-Major, G-Major, D-Major, A-Major, E-major, F-Major, B flat-Major, as well as A-minor, D-minor, and E-minor.

Each key is explored through the study of its scale, common chord progressions, a solo piece by Pratten, an arrangement of a popular tune for solo guitar, and an arrangement of a song or aria for voice and guitar. For example, in the G major unit the pupil is presented a Vesper Hymn by Pratten followed by a setting of a Neapolitan Song and Verdi's "La Donna È Mobile" (with English lyrics). As the key figures prominently in the repertoire Pratten adds a short work called *Sicilien Mariners* and Verdi's "Brindisi" from *La Traviata* also in an Anglicized version called "We'll Laugh and Sing All Cares Away". Thus, the key is cleverly explored in an Italian theme.

Nineteenth century guitar performers, including the virtuoso Luigi Legnani, were also respectable singers and would often sing while accompanying themselves on the guitar. This tradition seems to be given its expression in this section.

Section III

The third section opens with an extraordinary diagram mapping the strings into four zones of timbre (Fig. 2). Each zone is carefully explained and Pratten goes into some detail about what constitutes a good tone and an effective approach to expression. The middle section of Sor's Minuet from Op. 11, later to be included in full in the repertoire section, is

analyzed from the zones labeled E, D, C, B and A in the diagram.

Section IV

The fourth section is an expansion of the technical material introduced in the second section. The hands are addressed separately with arpeggios as the main technical challenge in the right hand and slurs in the left hand. The coordination of the hands is examined through a comprehensive series of arpeggios and scales in thirds, sixths, octaves, and tenths in various keys. Both the scales and arpeggios place an importance on proper shifts in various ascending and descending forms. Another consequence of playing these exercises is a thorough knowledge and understanding of the fret-board.

Section V

The fifth section is a detailed description of performing harmonics on the guitar. Pratten not only gives instruction on how to produce a good harmonic tone but also provides a discussion on the merits of harmonic notation. A diagram locating all the natural harmonics on the instrument is provided and the topic is analyzed through several examples extracted from works by Legnani, Giuliani and Kreutzer.

Section VI

The final section of the manual is a selection of the following repertory pieces:

Legnani: Caprice Op. 20, No. 9
Sor: Minuet, Op. 11, No. 5
Pratten: Theme Original
Pratten: Spanish Dance
Sor: Movement de Priere Religieuse [Etude, Op. 31, No. 23]
Sor: Etude [Op. 31, No. 22]
Sor: Galop, Op. 32, No. 6

Sor: Andante Pastoral, Op. 32, No. 3
Giuliani: Valse, Op. 57 [Trio from
Valse, Op. 57, No. 10]
Sor: Piece in F
Giuliani: Extract from Concerto
No. 3, Op. 70
Kreutzer: Variations on “God Save
the Queen”, Op. 12

The selection is interesting from several points of view. The pieces are all original compositions for the six-string guitar (not arrangements), musically conservative but diverse in style and character. In Sor’s Minuet from Op. 11 Pratten adds a flowing *cadenza ad libitum* in the second ending of the B section dramatizing and elongating the final bars of the composition. Apart from the two works by Giuliani in this section she recommends several other works by the composer including the Grand Variations, Op. 104.

Availability and Conclusions

A small portion of Pratten’s output has been digitalized by

several libraries. A noted source for her compositions is the Boije collection at the Music Library of Sweden. The Guitar School has been digitalized by the Royal Irish Academy of Music as part of the Hudleston Collection of Guitar Music and is available for download at the Guitar Digital Archive with the link:

<http://digitalguitararchive.com/archive/index.php?result=18&page=1&name=archive&table=all&search=Pratten&field=keyword&sort=author&rows=25&filter=all>

Though Pratten lived and worked during a relative decline in the instrument’s popularity her pedagogical approach, based on the study of earlier models like Sor and Giuliani, shaped the careers of her students and followers. One of her students, Ernest Shand (1868-1924-) became the most acclaimed British guitarist before Julian Bream and an author of his own guitar manual.¹¹ Pratten’s sister Giulia, who inherited the music business after her sister’s

death, was appointed Professor of the Guitar at the Guildhall School of Music.

For the modern guitarist, Pratten’s *Guitar School* offers an important glimpse into the stylistic and expressive tools employed by the Victorian guitarists in England. Thus, its close study should illuminate some works by Regondi and Pratten’s own delicate miniatures.

Finally, in the nineteenth century women played a significant role in cultivating the guitar as amateur performers and consumers of pedagogical literature. Yet, few left individual legacies. Thus, Madame Pratten should be recognized as a true pioneer for her compelling and meaningful contributions to guitar playing and teaching in the Romantic period.



¹¹ Button, Stewart, *Julian Bream: the foundation of a musical career*, (London: Scolar Press, 1997): 10