

Mertz in America:  
The Music of J. K. Mertz in Early  
Twentieth-Century America

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# Introduction

Although it is very unlikely that the Viennese guitarist and composer J. K. Mertz (1806–1856) ever traveled to America's shores, his music had a profound impact upon American guitarists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While other European contemporaries of Mertz did perform on American soil, including Zani de Ferranti (1801–1878) and A. F. Huerta (1800–1874), Mertz's reputation established itself without his physical presence. This dissertation studies significant documents, manuscript copies of musical scores, publications, and fretted instrument journals that indicate the general reception of J. K. Mertz in America before the sweeping influence of Andrés Segovia (1893–1987). Produced by one of the outstanding guitar composers during the middle of the nineteenth century, the music of Mertz ranges from fundamental studies to characteristic miniatures and large-scale concert works similar to the piano literature of the time. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American guitarists showed great interest in the compositions of European guitar composers including Sor, Giuliani, Regondi, Legnani, Ferranti, and Mertz. The guitar works of Mertz were clearly favored among the American virtuosos at that time. This affinity is evident in concert programs, in correspondence between American guitarists of the period, and in the numerous American journals devoted to fretted instruments, such as *Cadenza*, *Crescendo*, *S. S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal*, and *Etude*. This dissertation provides a detailed survey of these sources, as well as collections, archival materials, and manuscripts pertaining to the reception of Mertz's music during this period.

In the years preceding World War I, much of this repertoire was eclipsed by the widespread reception of first the eminent Spanish virtuoso Miguel Llobet (1878–1938), and subsequently more decisively by Andrés Segovia. Both preferred for their repertoire transcriptions of classical works, new compositions, and the Spanish guitar composers of the nineteenth century. In addition to a change in repertoire, the American reception of the

## Chapter 1

# Biography

J. K. Mertz was one of the leading virtuoso guitarists and composers during the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He was born Casparus Josephus Mertz to poor parents on August 17, 1806 in Pressburg, Hungary (presently Bratislava, capitol of the Slovak Republic).<sup>2</sup> He began to play the guitar and flute as a youth and was compelled to give music lessons at an early age. The earliest record of his activity as a concert artist is from 1834 when Mertz performed in a Pressburg concert organized by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, himself a native of that city.<sup>3</sup> Mertz left his birthplace in ca. 1840 to establish himself in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> He appeared in a concert at the

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<sup>1</sup> The essays by the composer's widow Josephine Mertz regarding her late husband, reminiscences of Mertz by Nikolai Makaroff, and the dissertation on the composer's life and works provide most of the composer's biographical information. See Josephine Mertz, "Life of the Late J. K. Mertz," trans. J. M. Miller, *Cadenza* 1, no. 3 (January-February 1895): 4; idem, "Johann Kaspar Mertz," *Mitteilungen* 2, no. 12 (December 1901): 83-85; 3, no. 1 (February 1902): 9-12; Nikolai Makaroff, "The Memoirs of Makaroff," trans. V. Bobri and N. Ulreich, *Guitar Review* 3, 5 (1947): 56-59 and 109-113; Matanya Ophee, "The Memoirs of Makaroff—A Second Look," *Soundboard* 9 (Fall, 1982): 226-233; and Astrid Stempnik, "Caspar Joseph Mertz: Leben und Werk des letzten Gitarristen im österreichischen Biedermeier" (Ph.D. diss. University of Berlin, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> There has been some confusion regarding the names that the initials J. K. actually represented. The composer used only the initials J. K. throughout his career. The composer's widow identified Mertz as "Josef Kaspar" in her biographical essays of her late husband, while most German publications in the first half of the twentieth century refer to the composer as Johann Kaspar. According to a baptismal record located by Astrid Stempnik, the composer's name was Caspar Joseph Mertz. The present work retains the initials the composer used throughout his career.

<sup>3</sup> For the dates and locations of Mertz's concert activity see Stempnik, "Caspar Joseph Mertz," 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> Josephine Mertz specifies 1840 as the year of the guitarist's arrival in Vienna, but it is likely that Mertz occasionally traveled from Pressburg to Vienna before 1840,

## *Chapter 2*

# **The Music of J. K. Mertz**

Joseph Kaspar Mertz was a prolific composer for solo guitar, guitar duo, and (often composed in collaboration with his wife) guitar and piano duo. He also wrote works for voice and guitar (or piano) and a trio for violin (or flute), viola, and guitar, as well as several works for kindred instruments to the guitar, the zither and mandolin. Mertz's other publishers in addition to Haslinger included Hoffmann (Prague), Aibl (Munich), and Ricordi (Milan). His opus numbers reach 100, although many works with opus numbers are missing. Responding to musical trends prevalent in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, the compositions of Mertz depart from the traditional forms preferred by previous guitar composers. The influence of piano music by Mendelssohn, Chopin, and early Liszt, as well as a diversity of opera composers and idioms, all inform the music of Mertz. His concert works and operatic fantasies are expansive and rhapsodic, and his miniatures are poetic and descriptive. The dance forms of Mertz, primarily Ländler, polonaises, mazurkas, and Hungarian dances, exemplify a more traditional formal treatment, usually a binary form and often with a minuet-trio format.

Hallmarks of his musical style include a thorough use of accompaniment textures with rapid, perpetual arpeggio figures. In fact, Mertz seems to allow these textures to take precedence over the independence of the melody. The textures are nearly always arpeggio or tremolo based, demonstrating an endless array of possibilities. His use of chromaticism is in line with musical practice of the day. His harmonic language includes frequent diminished chords (often the common-tone diminished chords prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century music), extended dominant harmonies, borrowed chords, frequent use of the Neapolitan sixth chord in minor keys, and unexpected modulations. His use of chromaticism in the melody

### Chapter 3

## The Popularity of Mertz in Europe ca. 1885–1925

There was a remarkable enthusiasm for the music of Mertz during the *fin de siècle* period in both Europe and the United States. In Germany Mertz was often referred to as a native composer. He was hailed as the “bedeutendste deutsche Gitarrenkomponist und Virtuos” by Erwin Schwarz-Reiflingen and the “größter deutscher Meister der Gitarre im 19. Jahrhundert” by Bruno Henze.<sup>29</sup> Citing the predominance of the Italian guitar soloists of the first half of the nineteenth century, Schwarz-Reiflingen stated “Der erste deutsche Gitarrevirtuos von Bedeutung, der auch als Komponist einen Ruf hatte, war J. K. Mertz.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, many guitar enthusiasts in America believed Mertz was the greatest German guitarist. A question to Vahdah Olcott-Bickford reads, “Were there any other German guitarists as great as Mertz?” Mrs. Olcott-Bickford replied, “There have never been any German guitarists as great as the Hungarian guitarist, Mertz, but I consider Adam Darr the greatest of the German guitarists, his style in composition being quite similar to that of Mertz. In fact, I think the compositions of Darr are more like those of Mertz than are those of any other writer for our instrument that we have ever had.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Erwin Schwarz-Reiflingen, ed., *Klassische Gitarrebibliothek Bd. 8: Drei Nokturnos für Gitarre von J. K. Mertz, Op. 4* (Leipzig-Berlin: Zimmermann, ca. 1919), 4 and Bruno Henze, *Ausgewählte Gitarre-Werke von Johann Kaspar Mertz* (Berlin: Ad. Koster, ca. 1921), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Erwin Schwarz-Reiflingen, ed., *Altmeister der Gitarre [Heft III] Johann Kaspar Mertz* (Magdeburg: Heinrichshofen's Verlag, ca. 1920), 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Cadenza* 25, no. 12 (December 1918): 23. For more information on Adam Darr (1811–1866) see Otto Hammerer, “Adam Darr,” *Mitteilungen* 2, no. 2 (July 1905): 7–8; idem, “Adam Darr, Guitarist,” *Crescendo* 3, no. 11 (May 1911): 20 and Peter Danner, “Three Pieces by Adam Darr,” *Soundboard* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 166–171.

## Chapter 4

# The Guitar in America ca. 1885–1925

The guitar, banjo, and mandolin were exceedingly popular instruments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Professional and amateur clubs and orchestras of these kindred instruments were thriving from coast to coast.<sup>46</sup> The developing popularity of these clubs is described in a contemporary fretted instrument journal of 1896:

In no department of music has greater progress manifested itself during the past few years than in those organizations known as BANJO, MANDOLIN and GUITAR CLUBS. The advent of the now popular 'Banjo Club,' which dates back only about a decade, was the starting point of a renewed awakening of interest in the guitar, and the impetus received by this instrument and the mandolin, working in harmony with the banjo, has resulted in a sort of 'boom' for these instruments. There are hardly any other three different instruments in existence that work so closely in harmony as the banjo, the guitar, and the mandolin.<sup>47</sup>

In 1898 C. D. Schettler, a guitarist active in both Germany and the United States commented that while he recognized the value of foreign training, he considered "America as having taken the lead of late years, both in manufacture of high-grade instruments and in music, ensemble work for the guitar and mandolin having become very popular and having engaged the attention of many talented artists."<sup>48</sup>

The role of the guitarist in these fretted instrument clubs was generally that of an accompanist, but guitarists often appeared as soloists during the varied programs of these organizations. The solo recital by an individual

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<sup>46</sup> The popularity of these instruments was not reserved for Americans. Similar trends were evident at this time in Germany, Great Britain, and Australia.

<sup>47</sup> *S. S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal* 13, no. 3 (August-September 1896): 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Cadenza* 5, no. 1 (September-October 1898): 14.