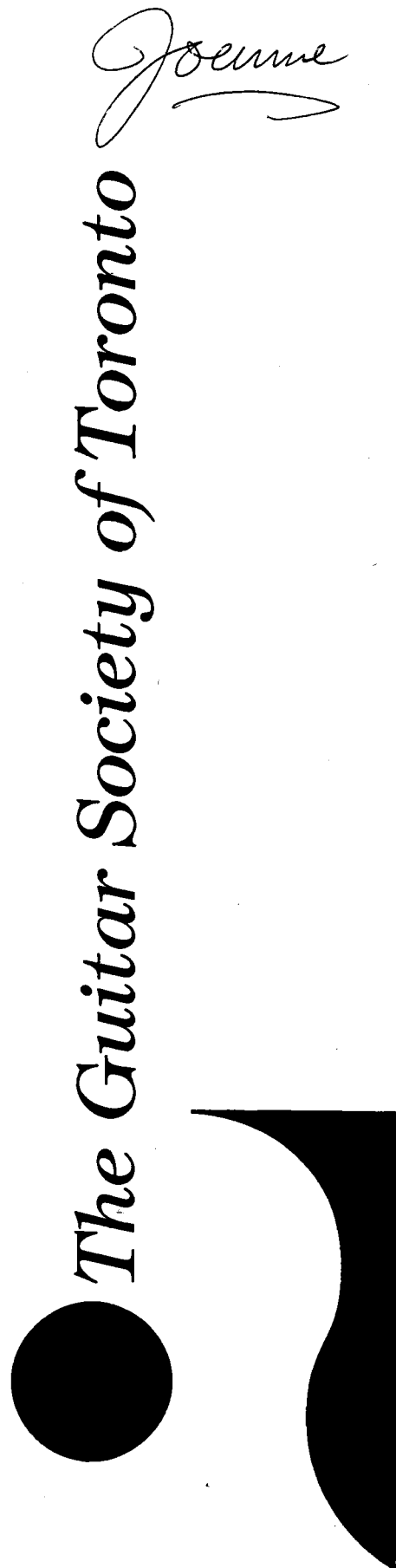


The Guitar Society of Toronto  
Annual Benefit Concert

# TRIBUTE TO ELI KASSNER

*upon the occasion of his  
65th birthday and his  
30th year as a teacher at  
the Faculty of Music of  
the University of Toronto*

May 27, 1989 7:30 p.m.  
Walter Hall  
Edward Johnson Building  
University of Toronto



# Eli Kassner: a biography

By Harold Smith

**E**li Kassner was born in Vienna, Austria on May 27, 1924, into a devout Jewish family. His father was a salesman by vocation, but his primary preoccupation was with Talmudic study. In his early adolescent years, in addition to his academic education, Eli studied the guitar, sang in the synagogue choir and received a Jewish education (particularly Hebrew) from his father.

During the 30s, with the rise of Nazism, the life of Jews in Vienna became increasingly precarious. In 1939, a German diplomat was assassinated by a Jew in Paris and this quickly escalated persecution of Austrian Jews. At the age of 15, Eli was fortunate to be accepted by Hadassah, a Jewish women's Zionist organization, as part of a group of 60 youths who were luckily able to emigrate to Israel. Though his brother made his way to Belgium, both parents and a sister perished in a concentration camp.

Eli's first two years in Israel were spent in a pioneer kibbutz where he was taught the trade of cobbling. In 1942, he was sent to another kibbutz to practice this trade, but, because of his musical background, he also became involved in the production of shows, conducting a choir and singing on the radio. He also painted.

In 1945, Eli was sent to Yagur, a mixed industrial kibbutz, to study weaving. At Yagur, he got his start at teaching art, weaving and music. He asked to remain and became chairman of cultural activities.

On the partition of Palestine by the U.N. in 1947, and the outbreak of war, Eli served in the Israeli army. Following the creation of the state of Israel and armistice, Eli took up residence in Ein Karem, a youth village in Jerusalem. He was appointed to the position of director of culture, teaching various subjects, including science and music, and directing shows.

By 1951, Eli's brother was in Canada and urged Eli to come and join him. When he arrived, Eli says that for the first time he experienced the feeling of being free. In Austria he had been oppressed by the Nazis; in Israel he was circumscribed by the besieged state of the country. He could now move and act according to his inclination.

Despite his limited knowledge of English, Eli obtained a job in a music store. Between serving customers, he practised guitar in a corner of the store. He thus met

people who also played the guitar. One of them asked Eli to give him lessons. By 1955, Eli was teaching full-time, despite being warned that he would "never make it"! In 1956, under Eli's leadership, this group formed the Guitar Society of Toronto. At that time, Segovia was almost alone in the world in performing on the classical guitar in concert. He was asked, and accepted, the position of honorary president of the Society, a position he held until his death in 1987. In 1958, Segovia invited Eli to study with him and, with the aid of a Canada Council grant, Eli was able to accept.

In 1959, Eli joined the Royal Conservatory of Music. From 1960 to 1962, he played in the Stratford Festival stage orchestra under Louis Applebaum, appearing on stage on at least one occasion as a guitar playing member of the cast. He also concertized and was heard on CBC radio and television, where he was associated with Susskind, Somers and others.

As a teacher, Eli had to create a teaching method from scratch. He was in a position to pick the brains of his contemporaries. Possessing superb analytical gifts and the ability to draw hands, he was able to put together a teaching method which was eclectic and flexible. In fact, Eli explains, what he developed was not a system, but an individual approach. Eli describes these early days as a "voyage of discovery."

Eli began teaching guitar at the U. of T. Faculty of Music in 1959 and was its only guitar instructor until 1978 when Norbert Kraft (one of Eli's students) came on staff. Eli opened his own guitar academy in 1967. Since then, many of his former students and instructors have formed their own academies. Eli's students include Liona Boyd, Norbert Kraft, Lynne Gangbar, the Wilson-McAllister duo, Laura Young, Gordie O'Brien and many others.

In 1975, under Eli's leadership and guidance, the Guitar Society of Toronto organized Guitar '75, an international guitar festival. Over 500 performers, composers, teachers, students and aficionados assembled in Toronto. Other festivals have followed in what has become a triennial event. Much new and important music has been commissioned as a result of these festivals. The international performance competition,

associated with these festivals, is now considered to be one of the most important in the world.

In 1978, Eli formed the University of Toronto Guitar Ensemble and has been its artistic director since then. This group, as with so much of Toronto's guitar activity, has achieved international recognition and has performed in Cuba, the U.S.A. and Martinique. There are now invitations to perform in Europe and the U.S.S.R.

Eli has personally been invited as juror and lecturer to Brazil, the U.S. and Cuba. He is renowned throughout the guitar world. Students visit him from other parts of Canada and other countries to consult with him and to receive instruction.

However, the guitar is not Eli's only career. Starting with a \$10 microscope about 20 years ago, he has become an accomplished cine-micrographer, i.e., filming through the microscope. He has progressed to an expensive microscope and filming equipment and has created five films for the CBC's *The Nature of Things* including *The First Inch*, *The Silent Explosion* and *The Invisible Reef*. These films explore soil, water, and life on a microscopic level. In this field Eli has won several international awards and mentions - the Monaco Award, the Bell-Northern and others. A 10 minute short, *Images*, made in 1968, won a Berlin Film Festival Award and was distributed commercially.

Starting out as a Holocaust orphan, Eli Kassner made his way to Canada in the early 50s. Since his arrival, he has made a remarkable contribution to the Canadian mosaic, as teacher, musician, artist and scientist. As part of the international guitar renaissance, he has been in the forefront. Because of his activities, noted Canadian composers, such as Milton Barnes, Harry Freedman, Lothar Klein, Harry Somers, Kenin Talivaldis, John Weinzwieg, and others, have composed for the guitar. Internationally, three examples are Leo Brouwer of Cuba, Stephen Dodgson of England, and Guido Santorsola of Uruguay. In the seventh decade of his life, he continues to work vigorously in music, film and art, and as a catalyst and inspiration to others.

# The Guitar Society of Toronto

*A personal history*  
*By Eli Kassner*

**I**t was shortly after WW II. The people of the world were picking up the pieces and trying to put them together again to start a new life. On the one hand, there was great despair over the horrible events that took place in the past, but on the other hand there was hope, incredible energy, dedication and faith in the future. It was during this time that I arrived in Toronto. When I came to Canada I spoke very little English and, having to support a family, I looked for work, any kind of work. I had studied guitar and music since I was 8 years old and I knew quite a lot about classical music. Luckily I was able to find a job in a music store - Whaley, Royce & Co. at Yonge and Dundas, which in 1951 was the biggest in Toronto. At that time Toronto was a very sleepy and unexciting large village.

There was little cultural or artistic activity in Toronto, but because of that there was also much room to grow. There was a lot that needed to be done. Over the next two decades Toronto was going to change radically to become the vital metropolis we know today.

The classical guitar was virtually unknown in Canada and was thought of as some kind of novelty instrument. The only classical guitarist was Andres Segovia, who was greatly admired as a musician of almost supernatural ability. It was also at this time that Segovia's long-playing records first appeared in the stores and people began to hear the miraculous sounds that the great master was able to elicit from his six strings.

The inevitable started to happen. People wanted to imitate Segovia. Gradually more and more people started to look for classical guitars, guitar music and strings. I was able

to convince my employers at the music store that they should import some guitar music and stock up on classical guitars.

Another very important development took place at that time: the invention of nylon strings. Those of us who had to struggle with gut-strings (the only classical guitar strings available until then) will appreciate the significance of this event. Suddenly it became possible to keep a set of strings on your instrument for months at a time without the constant threat of strings snapping in the middle of a performance or the unceasing bother of keeping your guitar in tune. Now it became possible to seriously study guitar using proper instruments and to learn real guitar music arranged by the great master himself, Andres Segovia.

It was in this atmosphere of great expectations that a group of six guitarists, whom I got to know in my capacity as a sales clerk at Whaley Royce & Co., decided that we would meet from time to time to play for each other and to simply enjoy each other's company.

Being a guitarist in Toronto at that time was a very lonely existence and it was a great joy to find another kindred spirit. There was John Bonfield, a British engineer who played guitar as a hobby; Eugene Lucas from Yugoslavia who was teaching all kinds of instruments and played the guitar very beautifully; Bob Carter, a true aficionado, who learned to play guitar while spending some time in Mexico and John Perrone who was a fine flamenco guitarist. There was also Norman Chapman, who as a sailor in the Canadian merchant marine visited Brazil frequently and had the good fortune to have studied, albeit irregularly,

with Isaias Sávio in São Paulo. He became a good personal friend and I learned a great deal from him. He was then the only guitarist I knew personally who could actually play Tarrega's *Recuerdos de l'Alhambra*. We met several times and had some wonderful evenings performing our somewhat limited repertoire for each other, comparing fingerings and exchanging what little information we had about matters dealing with classical guitar technique and literature. And when we ran out of solo repertoire we sang Mexican and Spanish songs, strumming lustily with lots of rasgueados and golpes.

Nowadays it is relatively easy to find qualified guitar teachers who can guide a student from the very first stumbling steps up to the highest virtuoso level. In the 50s, however, this was virtually impossible. As a result, everybody was self-taught and had to literally re-invent the art of playing the classical guitar. The available instruction books were old-fashioned, often very inaccurate and misleading when dealing with technique. Those that were more up to date were very difficult to follow without a teacher. One day a customer at the store heard me practice a Bach Gavotte, and he asked me if I would be willing to teach him. I told him that I had no teaching experience, but that if he would agree to be my guinea-pig, I would do my best to teach him what I knew. Thus it happened that I became a guitar teacher. Other students soon followed. Eventually I was able to quit my day job and make a living teaching classical guitar.

As the number of students grew and our meetings became larger and more diversified, we felt that it would be beneficial for

all of us to formally establish a guitar society. In 1955, Andres Segovia gave a concert in Toronto after not having played here for many years. This was the first time that I actually heard the great master in person and, needless to say, it was an incredible experience for me and my many guitar friends who flocked to the Eaton Auditorium on College Street where the concert took place. After the concert some of us went backstage to congratulate the Maestro and to get his autograph. Andres Segovia subsequently returned to Toronto every year.

The secretary of the Guitar Society was at that time Isabelita Alonso, a beautiful Spanish lady who sang Spanish songs and whom I accompanied on some radio and live television shows. In 1957 she and I spoke to Segovia telling him about our Society and the growing interest in the classical guitar in our city. He was very kind and encouraging and told us about the New York guitar society of Vladimir Bobri and Albert Augustine. We asked him then if he would agree to become our honorary president and much to our surprise he said yes! During his next visit to Toronto he attended a party we gave in his honour at the home of Dr. Bill Goodman and officially accepted his honorary title. On this occasion some of us, including myself, performed for the Maestro. This was a very harrowing experience. Afterwards, Segovia invited me to come and study with him in Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. With the help of the Canada Council I was able to do so.

By now we had about 60-70 members and we were a very enthusiastic and enterprising group. Ken Young, who had studied with me for a while, became the secretary of the Society. He was a lover of the guitar and an enthusiastic and capable organizer. We organized monthly meetings and concerts featuring our own members and published a monthly newsletter called the *Guitar Toronto Bulletin*. In our hunger to hear more guitar, we dared to become impresarios and to bring international artists to Toronto. The first of these was Rey de la Torre, a very prominent Cuban-American guitarist who lived in New York and who had studied with the legendary Miguel Llobet. That venture was an artistic and financial success. We didn't lose any money and in fact made a small profit which was designated to become our scholarship fund. Every time Segovia came to Toronto he told us about the new and promising young artists appearing on the guitar scene: Narciso Yepes, Julian Bream, Alirio Diaz, John Williams, Ida Presti and Alexandre Lagoya, Oscar Ghiglia and others. Since then, the Guitar Society of Toronto has been in the forefront of presenting the guitarists of the world to this city. An additional benefit arising from this was that

because these artists came here to perform we had the opportunity to study with them in masterclasses and private lessons.

Much progress was also made on another front. The guitar was not recognized by the Royal Conservatory of Music or by the University of Toronto as a proper or worthwhile instrument. It was looked upon as suitable only for folk music and jazz. To play classical music on a guitar was sneered at and ridiculed in the ivory towers of academia. In 1957 I approached Boyd Neal, Dean of the faculty of music at the U. of T., and Dr. Ettore Mazzoleni, principal of the Royal Conservatory, with the idea of starting a guitar program in these institutions. Eventually, after much convincing, they invited me to play for them and to present an outline and a syllabus of such a guitar course. The audition and the presentation went very well and subsequently, in 1959, they invited me to join their respective faculties and to start a comprehensive guitar program. This was the very first time that any university in Canada (and I believe in North America) had officially recognized the guitar. This official recognition of the guitar, and the resulting prestige and legitimacy derived from it, gave us incentive to expand our activities. We started to commission new music for the guitar, the first of which was Harry Somers' *Sonata*.

Our own standards and expectations also began to rise. A new generation of young guitarists grew up in an atmosphere of recognition and appreciation. Our monthly meetings featured teenagers Liona Boyd, Martin Polascek, Amparin Prieto, Lynne Gangbar, Danny Beckermann, Eddie Mönch, and many others who have gone on to become performers and teachers all over the world. In 1965, Julian Bream held a masterclass in Stratford, Ontario and he expressed his amazement at the high level of accomplishment of our students. At this time the famous German luthier Edgar Mönch came to live in Toronto and made many great guitars and taught several apprentices the luthiers' art, thereby laying the foundation for a very important group of Canadian luthiers of renown: Kolya Panhuyzen, Jean L'Arrivee, Michael Shriner, Serge de Jonge, William 'Grit' Laskin, and others.

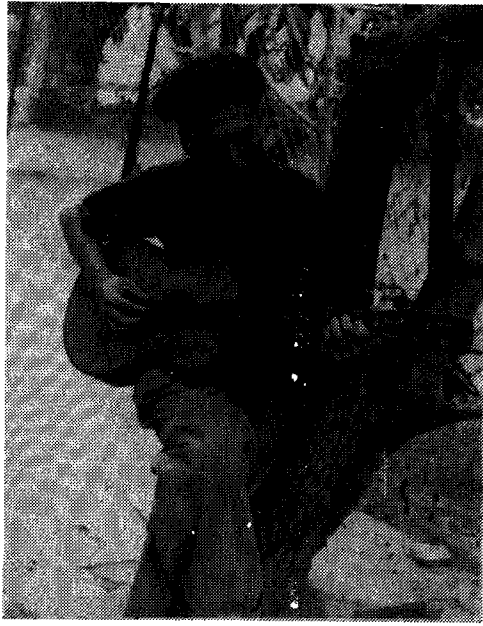
As we continued to grow, we looked for fresh ideas. In one of our brainstorming sessions I suggested that we might have a festival bringing together guitarists from Canada, the U.S., and other countries for an opportunity to hear guitar music at its best. It was then that we decided to organize an international guitar festival and international guitar competition, which became known as Guitar '75. This was the first such festival in North America and was indeed a marvellous affair. Joan York was the society's secretary at that

time and, with the help of many volunteers, we were able to make it happen. About 500 guitar teachers, students, composers, luthiers and aficionados took part. For one week in June 1975, Toronto became the guitar capital of the world. We heard great concerts by Carlos Barbosa Lima (Brazil), Leo Brouwer (Cuba), Oscar Ghiglia (Italy), Alirio Diaz (Venezuela) and the duo of Ako Ito (Japan) and Henry Dorigny (France). The winners of our first guitar competition were Sharon Isbin, Manuel Barrueco, David Leisner and Elliott Fisk, all of whom have since achieved international fame. Since then we have organized four more such festivals and international competitions - 1978, 1981, 1984 and 1987, all which were exciting events.

Over the years we continued to expand and improve. The Ken Young Scholarship Fund has helped many of our young students to further their studies by attending masterclasses here and in Europe. The fund also provides two annual scholarships for guitar students at the U. of T. and money from the fund was used for the commissioning of new guitar music. In the area of commissioning, the Society has made major contributions to the world of guitar. Some 70 new works were commissioned by our Society, including major guitar concertos by Canadian Harry Somers, Guido Santorsola from Uruguay, and Leo Brouwer the great Cuban composer who gave us the *Toronto Concerto*. Our festivals and our international composers' concours Quest for New Music provided the inspiration for many hundreds of new works for guitar. We initiated a three-year cycle of provincial, national and international guitar competitions. These competitions serve the purpose of raising the standards of guitar playing and of providing an important milestone in the artistic development of our young guitarists. In 1986, in addition to our monthly *Guitar Toronto Bulletin*, we started to publish a national guitar magazine *Guitar Canada*.

The Guitar Society of Toronto can proudly look back upon an uninterrupted 35 year existence during which time many things have changed. Guitar virtuosi are legion. Nowadays the guitar is one of the most popular instruments in the world. There are hundreds of thousands of guitar students worldwide and there are many fine teachers to show them the way. Practically all institutions of higher learning in Canada and the rest of the world now recognize the guitar as a legitimate instrument. The guitar repertoire is growing and becoming more diversified.

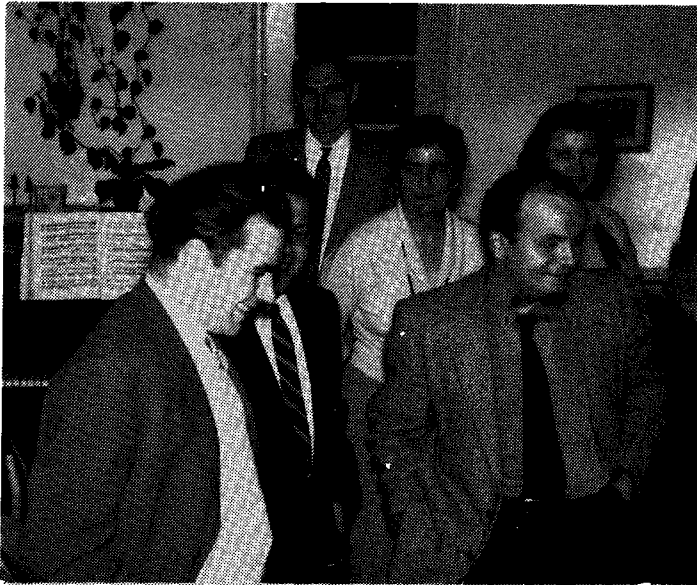
And the future looks bright. As the opportunities to study guitar seriously and to perform for appreciative audiences grow, so more and more talented students are attracted to our instrument. Our Society still has many important functions to fulfill. Judging by our past record, we are equal to the task.



Eli Kassner at 19



Eli playing for Segovia, 1958



Guitar Society Party for Julian Bream, 1959



Eli and Isabelita Alonso, 1960



Guitar Society Party for Carlos Montoya, 1961  
(Isabelita Alonso singing and dancing)



Guitar Society Party for Theodore Bickel, 1962

Guitar Society of Toronto  
Annual Benefit Concert

TRIBUTE TO ELI KASSNER

May 27 1989  
Walter Hall, Edward Johnson Building  
University of Toronto

PROGRAMME

Master of Ceremonies: Don Francks

1. University of Toronto Guitar Ensemble  
Artistic Director: Eli Kassner  
Conductor: Jack Bakker  
Two Traditional Chassidic Dances .....Eli Kassner  
Ritual Fire Dance  
from "El Amor Brujo" .....Manuel de Falla
2. Liona Boyd
3. Ed Bickert and Rob Piltch  
Jazz Duo
4. Rob Campbell, René Gely, and Jim Niven (Bass)  
Jazz Trio

INTERMISSION I

5. Film  
"Images" .....Julius Kohanyi and Eli Kassner
6. Danielle Kassner and Guillem Perez-Quer  
Duet Dedicated to Eli Kassner .....G. Perez-Quer
7. John Meldrum
8. Peter McAllister  
Homage to Scott Joplin .....Don Wilson  
(World Premiere)

9. Gordie O'Brien  
Preludio Epigrammatico  
(Dedicated to Eli Kassner) .....Leo Brouwer  
Cordoba  
Sevilla .....Isaac Albeniz

## INTERMISSION II

10. Malka and Joso
11. José Valle "Chuscales", Flamenco
12. "Lighthouse Jam"  
Paul Hoffert (Keyboards), Skip Prokop (Drums),  
Marvin Dolgy (Guitar), Terry Wilkins (Bass) and others.
13. Jim Buckland, Rock Guitar  
Toccata .....J.S. Bach/Buckland
14. "J.D. and the Pleasers", Rock Blues Group  
Jay Davidson, Paul Pigatt, Gregory Todd, Eliot Shulman,  
Jim Bish with guest artists: Brad and Stephen Thachuck,  
John Meldrum, Dominic Ashworth and others.

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STAGE MANAGER: Alvise Migotto

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## THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO GUITAR ENSEMBLE

### 1st Guitars

Alvise Migotto, Concert Master  
Bill Katsioutas  
Alvin Tung  
Paul Pigatt

### 2nd Guitars

Michael Bracken, Section Leader  
Bradley Thachuk  
Maria Molinari  
Danielle Cummings

### 3rd Guitars

Mark Bartolo, Section Leader  
David Jacques  
Christy DiIorio

### 4th Guitars

Cathy Morin, Section Leader  
Steve Thachuk  
Bruce Bernard

### Bass

Aris Gramaccione



Master Class with Andres Segovia, at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 1959 [some of the participants are José Tomas (sitting far left), Eli (standing far left), Sila Godoy from Uruguay (sitting next to Tomas), John Williams (standing far right)]



Guitar Society Executive, 1981  
(this group includes all the past Society Presidents except for Harold Levy, the current President)



# The Road to Respect

*Dean Carl Morey traces guitar at the U. of T.*

*By Harold J. Levy*

As Dean of the music faculty, Carl Morey continues the tradition of encouraging guitar at the University of Toronto. But, as the following interview with *Guitar Canada's* Harold Levy indicates, until Eli Kassner was invited to teach at the faculty thirty years ago, the classical guitar wasn't even a second-class citizen at the university - it was a non-entity.

**GUITAR CANADA:** What kind of programs did the faculty offer before Mr. Kassner arrived?

**CARL MOREY:** In the late 50's, the faculty started to develop its programs. At that point it had programs in composition, music education and history. But the whole question of high-level performance training was not very clearly addressed anywhere in Canada at the time. So when Eli came to town and started to teach formally both at the Royal Conservatory and the faculty (which at that time were very closely aligned) there really wasn't much difference in teaching at one or the other at the upper level. When he started to do that, he was not only introducing the serious study of the guitar, he was really on the ground floor of the development of the whole question of upper level performance training in the Faculty of Music.

**G.C.:** Did this involve a cross-section of musical instruments?

**C.M.:** Yes. By the late 60's a full program was in place leading to a degree in performance. One could major in performance studies on all orchestral instruments, piano, voice, and of course guitar. I don't have any statistics, but I am willing to bet heavy money that you would not have found many schools anywhere that gave serious consideration to guitar performance studies. In fact, the faculty has a rather adventurous history in that regard. Guitar and accordion have always been accorded quite high status in performance, and it's due to the extraordinary abilities of two teachers - Eli Kassner and Joe Macerollo.

**G.C.:** What bold person was willing to depart from the standard core of instruments?

**C.M.:** Arnold Walter, then director of the faculty, may have had, in some respects, a very conservative, central European view

of music. At the same time, however, he was something of an avant-garde thinker in terms of music education and training. He was obviously able to embrace the idea of serious guitar and accordion studies, as well as everything else. I think it was probably thought at the time though, that there would never be very many students in those instruments, and that there would never be many people good enough to play at that level. That's been somewhat true of the accordion, although there have been some very good students - but the guitar flourished in ways I doubt anyone could have expected.

**G.C.:** How do you explain the guitar's resilience?

**C.M.:** In the 60's, widespread interest developed in the guitar as a folk instrument, as a large number of people began playing it casually - at least for a time. In the same way that every living room seemed to have a piano early in the century, it came to be that everybody could strum the guitar a little bit if they were under the age of twenty. Just when the guitar was becoming a household instrument, Torontonians began to be exposed to the concerts of great guitarists. Segovia and Bream began to make local appearances. Increasingly, the virtuosi started to command the attention and the big fees of the established concert audience. Having such a distinguished teacher as Eli, at this particular time, meant that the faculty was well placed to receive the talented guitarist who wanted to study music in the same way that one studied the violin, piano, or clarinet, and other more conventional instruments.

**G.C.:** Did other Canadian music faculties recognize the classical guitar?

**C.M.:** In this respect, the faculty was unique. I have noticed recently that many of the students coming to us for their musical education are already accomplished classical guitarists.

**G.C.:** What has Kassner's influence been as a teacher?

**C.M.:** Eli virtually single-handedly created serious guitar studies in Toronto, if not in Canada. His most important students, such as Liona Boyd and Norbert Kraft, have achieved international acclaim. Norbert is on the faculty as an adjunct professor.

He is pursuing a concert career as well as an important teaching profession. Even though he has developed a very strong, independent personality as a guitarist, Kraft is a direct descendant of Eli, and he is now his colleague on the faculty. You can also look at the Wilson and McAllister guitar duo as an example. They have done some teaching and examining for us, and they are also graduates of the faculty. They too are part of the Kassner tradition. It's going to be a long time before there is a guitarist in this area who somehow hasn't imbibed the Kassner tradition.


**G.C.:** What is the current state of the guitar at the U. of T?

**C.M.:** It has a stable place. But it does not have the status of the piano as a solo instrument. It obviously does not have the place of chamber music instruments. It really exists as a highly specialized, although very, very, popular solo instrument. It would be an easy instrument to omit from the faculty, and the faculty would not suffer for this. Our orchestras would continue to function, we'd still produce teachers and performers for the general music life, but I don't think it would ever enter anyone's mind at this point to drop the guitar. The guitar has become a legitimate instrument at the U. of T.

**G.C.:** The U. of T. has supported Toronto's triennial Guitar Festivals enthusiastically. How did this come about?

**C.M.:** It was a natural outgrowth from the fact that Eli was part of the faculty, very well established, and the magnet for a substantial number of important students in the faculty when he thought up the idea of the festival and started to develop it. The year it started, the Edward Johnson building was available and the Festival has been a co-operative venture ever since.

**G.C.:** To what do you attribute Kassner's success at the faculty?

**C.M.:** Eli Kassner has that limitless patience of somebody who's totally devoted to something, just believes in it implicitly, and believes that it will happen. He will simply wait. He'll push gently where he believes the push is needed. But mostly he's a believer, and you can't divert believers from what they want. 

# New Can Con Rep Rap \*

*Harry Somers looks at composition  
for the guitar in Canada*

*By Harold J. Levy*

In the early 50's, composer Harry Somers had a chance meeting which was to have an impact on the guitar world for years; he ran into guitar enthusiast Eli Kassner at a Toronto music store. In Somers' own words: "I first saw Eli when he was working at a music store on Yonge Street, just above Dundas, and we just struck it off. I was buying some music, struck up a conversation, and I guess we just took it from there." That conversation introduced Somers to the fledgling Guitar Society of Toronto, and before long he was giving theory lessons to Society members. It also rocketed Somers into the world of mega-dollar commissions, after Kassner encouraged the Society to take advantage of Somers' prodigious talents. Somers affectionately discussed this commission in a recent interview with Guitar Canada's Harold Levy:

GUITAR CANADA.: Did it take very long before you were writing some compositions for the guitar, Harry?

HARRY SOMERS: Well, it took a few years, and it really came about as a result of the instigation of the Guitar Society. They asked me to do a composition for them, so I wrote a sonata for fifty bucks.

G.C.: And what was it called?

H.S.: Well, Eli Kassner called it the *Sonata for Fifty Bucks*.

G.C.: At least the Guitar Society got its money's worth.

H.S.: True, but maybe I should have done fewer movements!

G.C.: Was that really the only sonata you wrote for the guitar?

H.S.: Absolutely, yes. It was written to be played by people of supposedly limited technical means. So I made my attempt.

Prodged by Kassner, Somers continued to reflect on the ability of the guitar to give full range to his fertile musical imagination.

And the outcome, several decades later, was the *Concerto for Guitar* which was premiered in Toronto at the Guitar '84 Festival. The concerto was performed by George Sakellariou with Cuban guitarist Leo Brouwer conducting at the MacMillan Theatre.

This work was far from elementary; based on a five-note motif which is spun out in various ways, Somers envisaged the five notes as cards in a game. "It's as if someone takes a basic number of cards and produces continually changing shapes from them," he said at the time.

Critic Gaynor Jones wrote in the Toronto Star that the work was a "major" contribution to the repertoire, and that enlarging the repertoire "was one of the aims of the Guitar Society of Toronto, which has put on an international festival every three years starting in 1975."

The interview suggests that *Concerto for Guitar* remains a formidable challenge for any guitarist.

G.C.: Do you care to discuss the writing of the concerto?

H.S.: It was really tailored for Leo Brouwer who was originally supposed to have played the work. Brouwer was certainly the most unique guitarist I had heard in terms of technique and tremendous projection on that instrument. So I had written it with all his skills in mind and went for everything in sight on the guitar.

G.C.: How did the Sakellariou performance go?

H.S.: Sakellariou certainly did his best and he performed the finale brilliantly!

G.C.: What are the challenges the work poses for the guitarist?

H.S.: It's one's ability to be so fluent with technique and so firm in the projection of guitar tone, that the shape of the composition can be realized. Absolute, consummate technique is required to make the work cohesive. It confronts the performer with devilish problems.

G.C.: Would you be able to perform it?  
H.S.: There is no question. I wouldn't be able to touch it!

Somers has definite thoughts on the direction of guitar composition in Canada. Asked about the direction it is taking, he replies:

"I think it goes back to Eli's recognition of the need for new guitar repertoire. Segovia realized this of course. There was a repertoire for the nineteenth century, but nothing comparable to the standard of music that was written for the piano or the violin, for instance. The guitar was relegated to the status of a salon instrument. Then Segovia got the generic music of Spain on to the guitar with very fine Spanish composers, but it was all indigenous music, so the repertoire was either Bach or the Spaniards. And I think that Segovia was rather hostile to people who wanted to write for the guitar - even people like Stravinsky. Eli realized that the guitar had to have more weight in its repertoire, aside from all those charming pieces. He therefore went for what I think are the finest composers in the country. Their works may not please the guitarists who favour the old Spanish standards. But still, Eli has aimed at an impact by going after, and getting, the advanced composers. He's building up a repertoire of works for the guitar by our leading composers - he has encouraged composers throughout the world to write for the instrument. Eli's efforts have resulted in a real contribution to the development of guitar music."

Meanwhile, it's time for another Somers opus. Asked if he has any plans for a new work for the guitar Somers replies:

"It's always in my mind, but I am always being pulled in twenty directions which take me away from it. One time, it would be nice to be able to write a series of solo pieces, maybe a set of ten or twelve, that aren't so ferociously difficult."

We're waiting, Professor Somers. Will \$50.00 do?

\* New Canadian Content Repertoire Discussion

# Bravo Eli!

*Best 65th birthday wishes  
from his friends.*

I think of Eli as Mr. Classical Guitar of Toronto. I first met him in 1955, after struggling for a few months to teach myself to play using the *Carcassi* tutor book. My husband came home one day, excited, and told me he had found me a teacher. He was browsing in the Whaley-Royce music store, and heard some beautiful guitar music. It was Eli playing *Leyenda*.

I soon started lessons and was captivated by Eli's infectious enthusiasm, as so many of his pupils have been since. After my first lesson, during which Eli gently taught me not to rest my right hand little finger on the guitar (à la Carcassi method!) and not to let my left thumb peek over the fingerboard, I was soon happily playing little pieces.

About a year later, the fledgling Guitar Society, which Eli had started, held a reception for Segovia, who was the Honorary President. He wanted to hear some Toronto guitarists, and Eli was first on the "hot seat." Then Eli insisted that I should play for Segovia. Somehow I stumbled through the *Sor Study #5*, while Eli beamed.

Since those early days of Toronto's guitar history, Eli's zeal has changed the scene from a desert to a lush garden of fragrant concerts by the world's greatest artists, and the triennial Guitar Festival. I am sure that without Eli's continuous dedication, these developments would not have happened.

Now, I am more a spectator than a participant, and take great pleasure in seeing the rising young guitarists trained and inspired by Eli, and also in hearing the lovely music of the U. of T. Guitar Ensemble. May Eli continue his inspiring work for many years.

*Olive Wehrstein-Shaw*

Rio, April 9, 1989.

To Eli, who has made Toronto one of the major centres of the guitar world, and without whom all our lives and careers would have been a great deal duller and less successful. What memories we all have – wonderful parties with that wonderful "chicken schnitzel" – classes and concerts attended by ever more impressive students – unbelievable films and photomicrographs – film scores – computers – and rooms full of cacti. Long live the incomparable multifaceted Eli!

*Love Alice Artzt*



Happy Birthday Darling. All my love.

*Ann*



To the best guitar teacher in the world!  
Happy 65th birthday!

*Love Liona*

Happy Birthday Eli from your brother Leo Brouwer – and from the many guitarists from all over the world who know and love you.

*Leo*

Happy Birthday to our teacher, mentor and most of all our friend!

*Dominic Ashworth, Rene Gely, Dale Kavanaugh, Julie Lavender, Peter Mathers, John Meldrum, Jodie Mitchell, Tim Phelan, Ron Smith, Laura Young*

To 40 years of friendship. Happy Birthday!

*Bill Shepherd of Whaley Royce & Co.*

From all of us at Guitar Canada. Long life, happiness and keep pulling those strings!

*Richard "Dick" Allen  
Peter "Mac" Teeson*

