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# Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar by Darcy Kuronen Review

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probably have more than two pages. Occasionally several makers have to share a page.

The illustrations used come from a variety of sources. In the main, the reader sees full frontal photographs of the instruments themselves – usually well preserved examples in original condition. These pictures are often supplemented by photographs of performers playing various examples – either in concert, in magazine images, or on manufacturers' publicity poses. Other instruments are shown as part of the manufacturer's original catalogues, usually in their original black and white form, unlike the colour photographs which make up the vast majority of the illustrations. Finally, there is the occasional illustration in the form of a patent drawing – indispensable when discussing the 'Moderne', for example, one of the three fabled Korina trio produced by Gibson in the late 1950s of which no example survives.

What the book does not have is pages of tables or dimensions. This is to its advantage. Instead one gets descriptions of the instruments, and histories of the companies. There are an increasing number of more specialised books to cater for those interested in specific companies or models. Instead, this book serves as a reference book to provide a starting point for anyone interested in a particular company or model, written in an informative manner without ever underestimating the readership, or concentrating on aspects which are only of tangential interest.

DARRYL MARTIN

DARCY KURONEN, Ed., *Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar*. Boston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2000. 244 pages, colour illustrations, glossary, bibliography. ISBN 0-87846-485-9. Price \$29.95 in paper, \$45.00 in cloth covered boards.

Although the guitar has become a dominant instrument in popular music over the past fifty years, its history can be traced to early baroque instruments of the seventeenth century. Why has the guitar become so popular? Certainly it is easy to play (though, as with any instrument, it is difficult to become accomplished in its use), and its relatively inexpensive cost makes it attractive to beginners. But the reason for its dominance in popular music may be that so many performers use the guitar for their recordings, influencing other musicians, followers, and fans. So is the guitar the chicken or the egg? There is no straightforward answer, but guitar sales have certainly reached new heights. According to the April 2000 issue of *The Music Trades*, an industry trade journal, sales of fretted instruments amounted to \$150,764,000 representing 1,337,347 units (mostly guitars) sold in 1999, the last year for which records are available. Couple that with the number of guitars produced over the decades, most of which are still around, and one quickly sees that there are millions upon millions of guitars in circulation. Partly as a result of, but also to illustrate this relatively recent explosion in guitar interest, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston mounted

in 2000 a retrospective exhibition entitled 'Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar,' which ran from 5 November 2000 until 25 February 2001. The accompanying exhibition catalogue, a lavishly illustrated tome, more book than catalogue, is here given consideration.

The book serves as a vital history of this most versatile and enduring of instruments, from early ornamental examples of Italy and Spain to more recent electric guitars used by popular musicians. It features colour photographs of 110 guitars, each accompanied by a brief discussion of its history and manufacture. While there have been several histories of the guitar published over the past ten years, few cover the breadth of *Dangerous Curves*, and certainly fewer still so completely capture the instrument in its multitude of shapes sizes and mutations.

An introductory essay by music historian Darcy Kuronen places the guitar in its historical context while comments from thirty notable modern guitarists are sprinkled throughout the book and provide a more personal view of the guitar and its music. The book provides evidence that the guitar's destiny was ordained at least 400 years ago. From the beginning it was a humble instrument, something that ordinary people could play with little training. But in both its sound and its physical form, the guitar's essence has been flexibility. While early instruments were small and designed mostly for vocal accompaniment, after the beginning of the twentieth century the guitar began to take on new shapes and sizes as new approaches to design were explored. Archtops, resonator diaphragms, larger and larger body sizes, and finally electronic amplification brought the guitar to the absolute forefront of many ensemble arrangements. This range of instrument types is well-reflected in the book, including iconic instruments such as the Gibson L-5 archtop, pre-war Martin D-45 flattop, Fender Telecaster and Stratocaster, Gibson sunburst Les Paul, as well as an assortment of early gut-string instruments, harp guitars, steel guitars, ornate guitars, and one-off handmade specials.

That the guitar is also a work of art, an object of beauty shaped by the needs of sound reproduction as well as a basis for ornate decoration, is well illustrated. Some of the most decorated, inlaid, and beautiful instruments have been brought together for the exhibit. Together they form the 'dangerous curves' alluded to in the title. The sparseness of the small nineteenth-century Martin acoustic is contrasted with the oversized structure of the twentieth-century Gibson jumbo. The National resonator guitar fairly shouts art deco design. Finally, the Fender Stratocaster and Parker Fly electric guitars reveal flowing lines and aesthetic grace. Form follows function with an innate beauty.

The exhibition, and thus the book, is neither a complete history of the instrument, nor a justification for its popularity. Rather it is a celebration of the transformative power the guitar wields in today's music, as well as its own historical transformation through the ages. It manages to both capture the context and range of derivatives without diluting or overwhelming the impact of the instrument itself. If you were not able to visit Boston to see

the exhibition, the book is a little like being there yourself. It is available from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org). Telephone 617-369-3448.

ERIC C. SHOAF

CLIFFORD BEVAN: *The Tuba Family*. 2nd edition, revised, expanded and updated. Winchester: Piccolo Press, 2000. xx, 000 pp. Paperback ISBN 1 872203 30 2. £35.00 (US\$60.00).

This is a welcome second edition of Clifford Bevan's tuba classic - revised, expanded and updated. Faber & Faber published the original in 1978. There is a vast amount of new material: around 100 illustrations; 100 music examples (19th-century to modern) along with some sensitive discussion of the music in question; an extensive bibliography; lists of makers; lists of famous players, showing how their careers progressed; a list of collections mentioned - or raided for pictures; an appendix in the spirit of St Patrick, flushing out the 'Serpent presence ... in extant sets of parts, scores and in band instrumentation from 1698 to the end of the nineteenth century', and much more.

The book has been recast to avoid duplicating post-1978 contributions to tuba knowledge. As the author comments: 'Perhaps surprisingly, the tuba itself is now one of the best-documented instruments in existence ...'. He keys it in securely to the rest of the literature. This is very sensible, minimising the inconvenience that might have been caused by the book's UK bias (acknowledged up front). Its brass-sociological flavour is distinctly British.

The 'Instruments of the Orchestra' series edited by Philip Bate, for Ernest Benn Ltd, established a classic format which Dr Bevan follows quite closely. It is difficult to improve on. Start at the beginning, with ancient precursors and acoustic fundamentals; move chronologically through the instruments' developmental phases, discussing music alongside instrument technology (keywork, valve systems etc.) - the two are intimately related; then chapters on small, large and exotic family members; then, near the end (if at all), sections touching on non-orchestral uses to which the instruments have been put over time.

On page 426 we're reminded that 'the Tuba was conceived as a band instrument'. The vast majority of tuba players, all but a fraction of the tuba music composed and arranged, and almost the whole of the tuba market have been non-orchestral all along. Virtuosi of the band world were - are - every bit as accomplished as their orchestral counterparts; and often had - have - more demanding music to play. A very different, non-orchestral history could have been written, more working-class than patrician. It is only fair to warn people reading up on brass bands that a lot of potential interest to them is not to be found here.

Dr. Bevan writes beautifully. Readers with no prior knowledge (tuba knowledge anyway) can follow him from page 1 to some of the frontiers of