

Leopold Godowsky, pianist, eminent musical pedagogue and European sophisticate, was amused. It was 1911, and a young man fresh from the prairies of West Texas had arrived at his doorstep at the Vienna Royal Conservatory virtually unannounced. DAVID GUION, age nineteen, had come to take lessons, but fearing rejection, had neglected to write in advance for an appointment. Godowsky surveyed with curiosity Guion's tan, buttoned shoes and his western hat, elicited from him the information that he was the son of a lawyer and rancher, then asked him to play the piano. The young American did — "very badly. I was frightened out of my wits," Guion recalls in his memoirs. And what made Guion think Godowsky would take him as a student, the great pianist wanted to know. "My father told me any teacher would accept me if I paid enough for my lessons," Guion replied. Godowsky laughed uproariously. "So I am to be bought, like your father buys a fine bull." And the amused virtuoso assigned young David to an assistant, to prepare him for lessons with Godowsky himself.

Thus began three of the most pleasurable and instructive years in the long life of David Guion, pianist, rodeo cowboy and composer whom Olin Downes of *The New York Times* once compared to Stephen Foster as a writer of the music of America.

Cosmopolitan Vienna was certainly a far cry from Guion's home territory. What Viennese character, for instance, could possibly compare with Judge Roy Bean, "the law West of the Pecos," who dispensed his hard liquor and frontier justice at the border village of Langtry about 160 miles from Guion's home town of Ballinger. Guion met the judge in 1898, and in later years his memory of the occasion consisted mainly of Bean's white hair and long white beard and the bag of stick candy the "judge," really a justice of the peace, gave to him. And he remembered the hanging tree in front of the saloon.

Guion was born in 1892 in Ballinger, which, if it had no inhabitants quite as colorful as Roy Bean, had more than its share of real-life cowboys and other workers and artisans necessary to the cattle business. Ballinger was surrounded by ranches, including the T-O-Bar-G, the Guion family spread. Almost from the time he could walk young David was at home on a horse, and he took an active part in the work and play of the ranching community.

From the beginning Guion also had music in his bones. As a baby he heard his mother — a talented amateur pianist and soprano — sing the nursery rhymes, cowboy songs and frontier ballads popular in the Old West. From his Mammy Neppie, a former slave who was his childhood nurse, he heard Negro spirituals and other melodies reflecting the Black experience. Fiddling and guitar playing were an important recreation at family and community gatherings. All this music was indelibly impressed on the young boy's mind; years later it inspired numerous transcriptions and original pieces.

Guion's first piano teacher was his mother. Later he was taught by Charles J. Finger, a mysterious Englishman who had moved from London to San Angelo, Texas. "When anybody came to Texas in those days, they were never asked questions about their past," Guion says. On Saturdays David's parents put him on a train in Ballinger for the thirty mile ride to his lessons in San Angelo. A placard around his neck informed the conductor as to his name and destination. On Sundays Finger placed his young pupil on the train for the ride back home. Eventually the boy received musical training at educational institutions in Jacksonville, Illinois and Fort Worth, Texas.

It remained only for the Austrian experience to add the final element to Guion's musical personality. Vienna, in the era immediately prior to World War One, was the center of European cultural life, if not of the world. It was still very much the city of Brahms and Strauss and Mahler. Old Franz Josef still reigned. Resident or prominent in the musical life were such figures as Emil Sauer, Ferruccio Busoni, Ignace Jan Paderewski and Vladimir de Pachmann — all of whom Guion met through his teacher, Godowsky. Young Arthur Rubinstein was there, as were Schoenberg and Berg and Richard Strauss. Guion spent three years in this fascinating milieu and came to love the music as well as the scenic beauties of Austria. He might have spent the rest of his life as an expatriate if World War One hadn't intervened and forced him to sail for home.

After a brief period of teaching in Texas, Guion headed for New York. He first came to public attention when Nora Bayes sang his *Old Maid Blues* in the George M. Cohan revue of 1918. M. Witmark and Sons and G. Schirmer began publishing his music which quickly became popular and was sung by such outstanding performers as Mmes. Schumann-Heink, Galli-Curci, and Mabel Garrison. In 1924 he interested the manager of New York's Roxy Theatre in a musical production with a cowboy theme. When Guion's show, *Prairie Echoes*, opened, it included a number of pieces that were to make his name famous throughout the country: his transcriptions of *Turkey in the Straw* and *The Arkansas Traveler*, his own piece called *The Harmonica Player*, and several of his songs of which *Home on the Range* was to become the most popular.

Guion's newfound success did not draw him completely away from his beloved West. In the '20s he toured the summer rodeo circuit as a competitor. One of his proudest accomplishments came in 1923 when he won the bronc-riding championship at the Frontier Days Rodeo in Cheyenne, Wyoming, riding a horse called "Hell Raisin' Molly." It was one of many Guion rodeo prizes.

The 20s, '30s and '40s were Guion's heyday. He toured widely as a composer and performer. His music was sung and played by artists as varied as Percy Grainger, Bing Crosby, John Charles Thomas and the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini; John Philip Sousa made his own band arrangement of Guion's *Turkey in the Straw*. Guion also wrote large-scale orchestral compositions.

In the 1960's "rock 'n' roll put a crimp in my tail," as Guion puts it. But if Guion's music was no longer prominently presented by the mass media, it was indelibly a part of the American musical heritage, and still capable of giving great pleasure.



THE ARKANSAS TRAVELER is a popular old folk tune that Guion first heard as a fiddle "breakdown" played by a former slave named Elijah Cox (O' Coxy), widely known as one of the best bronc-busters and fiddlers in West Texas. Guion's piano arrangement of 1929, by no means child's play, was often programmed by Percy Grainger.

MINUET, an original composition of 1923, is an elegant, stately piece which reflects late 19th century musical tastes that remained popular through the early decades of the 20th century. The piece is clearly a product of Guion's years of study with Godowsky. Even though Guion considers himself largely self-taught in composition, the influence of the European masters whose works he admired and played is evident in his keyboard writing.

SHEEP AND GOAT WALKIN' TO THE PASTURE is another fiddle transcription made famous by Guion. The arrangement, dating from 1922, uses bits and pieces of other old cowboy breakdowns and some original ideas — "sidekicks," he calls them — of Guion's own.

THE LONESOME WHISTLER, an original composition from a suite titled *Alley Tunes, Three Scenes from the South* (1926), is a lyrical pianistic description of a boy ambling down an alley late at night.

THE HARMONICA PLAYER is a lively, contrasting piece from the same suite. It has long been one of Guion's most popular compositions.

The itinerant scissors grinder, with his sharpening stone, was a familiar figure in the West Texas of Guion's childhood. Yet if Guion's composition, THE SCISSORS GRINDER (1930), was inspired by memories of frontier America, that is not reflected in the music, which is clearly influenced by 20th century European music, French impressionism in particular.

The brilliant VALSE ARABESQUE (1927) is another original piece with European, rather than American, antecedents. It is in a grand waltz style popular in the virtuoso programs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One could imagine Godowsky, himself, playing it.

The MOTHER GOOSE SUITE (1937) offers some of Guion's most charming music. The suite consists of 17 short, descriptive movements, rather Schumann-like in concept, of which the first and the last are the most ambitious pianistically. The first, HEY, DIDDLE, DIDDLE, uses an original Guion tune; the rest are based on nursery tunes of J.W. Elliott. While the subject matter of the suite is naive, Guion's treatment of it is sophisticated, replete with characteristic flashes of Guion humor such as the musical scampering of mice or the barking of dogs in No. 6, THE THREE LITTLE MICE. The most familiar nursery tunes are used by Guion as well as some less familiar ones such as THE MAN IN THE MOON (No. 9), CURLY LOCKS (No. 15) and SIX LITTLE SNAILS (No. 16), with the snails' crawling represented by a painfully slow tempo. In spite of the subject matter, the pieces are not intended to be played by children, other than the most gifted; in the score the composer notes that many of the pieces require "the technical skill and artistic finish of the concert pianist."

The humorous aspects of the suite are quite apparent to the listener, but even more so to one who is also watching the score. Numerous performance directions are in English and detail such advice to the pianist as that given for the elegiac, nocturne-like No. 4, THE NORTH WIND DOT BLOW: to be played "slowly and with deep sympathy for Robin." No. 11, DING, DONG, BELL, directs the performer frequently throughout to play "bashfully," "with great sternness," "reluctantly," "sobbingly," "churchy" and so forth.

Stylistically, the pieces use a variety of compositional techniques ranging from traditional four-part harmony to the playful bitonality of the irresistible PUSSY CAT, PUSSY CAT, in which the treble is in E-flat while the bass is in E. In No. 13, HICKORY, DICKORY, DOCK, a series of minor seconds uncannily evokes the sounds of a cuckoo clock. No. 14, SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE, shifts unceremoniously and with infectious gaiety from E-flat major to D-flat major, back to E-flat, then to a surprise ending in E major making effective use of fourths, major sixths and sevenths. A dominant seventh ending chord of the interminably slow No. 16, SIX LITTLE SNAILS, leads to the exultant, fast-paced finale of No. 17, TOM, TOM, THE PIPER'S SON, the triumphant arpeggiated octaves and a long right-hand glissando ending the work with a crashing triple forte G major chord.

10/6/80

Olin Chism

Music Editor

*The Dallas Times Herald*