

C. F. Martin and His Guitars, 1796–1873. By *Philip F. Gura*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xix + 250 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$45. ISBN 0-807-82801-7.

Reviewed by Timothy B. Spears

Like a Martin guitar, Philip Gura's book is a pleasure to hold and behold; the prose is accessible and engaging. The illustrations alone—more than fifty glossy illustrations, featuring daguerreotypes of nineteenth-century musicians, period drawings and advertisements, and color photographs of surviving Martin guitars (some of them taken in open-air sunlight to highlight the natural beauty of these exquisitely crafted instruments)—reward casual browsing as well as close study.

Resplendent production values aside, *C. F. Martin and His Guitars* is primarily a business history that follows the career of Christian F. Martin, starting with his emigration from Germany in 1833, continuing with his beginnings as a craftsman and importer of European guitars and music equipment in New York City during the 1830s, and concluding with his later position as the manufacturer of America's best guitars, which C. F. Martin and Company (Martin was eventually joined in the enterprise by Christian Frederick Jr. and, for a brief period, by a business partner outside the family) distributed through the nation's expanding transportation network and commercial system. Gura's history departs from the familiar narrative of business modernization with its description of how Martin resisted the logic of the emerging industrial economy in order to maintain the quality of his product. For instance, as Martin's reputation for superior craftsmanship spread within the nation's music community—first on the East Coast and then, during the 1850s, in midwestern cities like Cincinnati and Cleveland—he had the opportunity to shift his entire wholesaling operation to large merchants of instruments and sheet music, who bought guitars manufactured by other companies and then sold the instruments under their own names to music-store owners and/or directly to consumers in their own retail establishments. Gura's depiction of the tangled web of creditors, jobbers, and retailers that defined the market for musical instruments echoes the observations of other business historians about the nineteenth century: as the economy

grew, it became increasingly rationalized and impersonal. However, the special nature of the Martins' product—both as an object of art and as an instrument used to make art—defined the firm's market strategy in a distinctive way. Despite the prospect of greater profits, the Martins proved unwilling to give up their name or the quality of their guitars by moving toward mass production and distribution. Although in the 1860s they contracted with a New York City wholesaler, C. A. Zoebisch (also owned by a German immigrant), to help distribute their guitars, they remained committed to high-quality construction and strove to control the market for their guitars. Thus, while between 1852 and 1855 C. F. Martin and Company manufactured about one thousand guitars, James Ashborn, a Connecticut manufacturer who adopted a factory system for manufacturing a higher volume of instruments (priced considerably lower than Martin's guitars), shipped three times that number. This is not to say that C. F. Martin rejected standardization; in fact, the company developed uniform guitar types and used interchangeable component parts that they purchased from other manufacturers. But they subordinated these innovations to the design and production aesthetic that Christian F. Martin brought with him from Saxony. Consequently, as Gura notes in his final chapter, the Martin guitars produced in 1873—and today—are as carefully made as those constructed in the 1830s.

With full access to the company's extensive records, Gura explains how Martin built a thriving business in 1830s New York by drawing on his German antecedents and connections within the city's heavily European music community. Gura's account of this phase of Martin's career, which he brings to life by carefully sifting through account books and inventory lists, adds to the picture of New York's business community developed by Stuart Blumin and others through its emphasis on music and ethnic identity. As Martin's business grew, he moved his firm to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, completing the transition to the Moravian community in 1839. Gura speculates that the panic of 1837, and its dramatic impact on the city's economy, precipitated this move, though in retrospect, it is also apparent that the move to Pennsylvania allowed the company to expand its production facilities. Gura discusses the Martins' manufacturing processes in some detail, but he emphasizes the firm's efforts to define its proper role in the nation's increasingly competitive market for guitars. *C. F. Martin and His Guitars* is most compelling when Gura brings these commercial details into his discussion of the guitar's

broader cultural importance. As he notes in the first chapter, the national “guitarmania” (p. 1) derived from the instrument’s ascension in the “hierarchy” (p. 17) of instruments that constituted Americans’ love of music-making. The guitar’s rising popularity in the 1830s and 1840s, which coincided with Martin’s success in business, was related to its seemingly exotic “Spanish” origins. But it was also crucially linked to the instrument’s size, portability, and affordability, which allowed Americans of all types to make music anywhere they wanted. The photographs and illustrations featured in the book—of men, women, and children, white and black, playing or holding guitars—make this point stunningly clear. Propelled by the ready availability of inexpensive sheet music, the guitar promoted the “democratization of sound” (p. 17).

In the book’s final three chapters, which follow the evolution of C. F. Martin and Company’s business between 1833 and 1873, Gura returns intermittently to these broader cultural issues, but does not subject them to the same forceful scrutiny that he brought to bear in the opening chapter. More to the point, he sidesteps the intriguing question of how the Martins’ decision to maintain the high quality and relative scarcity of their guitars relates to the democratization of the market. Also, while the book has much to say about the business and culture of nineteenth-century guitars, it sheds little light on the Martins themselves and their personal connection to the music culture that they helped to create. Like any good book or musical performance, *C. F. Martin and His Guitars* leaves its audience longing for more.

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