



La Leona: And Other Guitar Stories

James Gallant

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In James Gallant's erudite short story collection, *La Leona*, musicians witness European history from the sidelines.

These intricate stories traverse medieval Spain, Elizabethan Denmark, and revolutionary France. In "Isaac Albéniz Attends His Own Funeral," a dead pianist surveys the public reaction to his departure, his tactile descriptions building toward awareness that his newfound freedom isn't all that the afterlife has in store. In "The Spanish Buddha," a compact, poignant story set during the Spanish Civil War, a mortar shell destroys an instructor's early work; this disturbs him at first, but proves to be a relief, hinting at the gray trade-offs between rewards and losses.

In another story, a lovestruck man hears an Arab's six-string guitar whose "mellifluous sonority" he's certain would win a woman's affections. Elsewhere, an English vihuela player travels for a royal performance; Shakespeare, in a twist of truth, stages Hamlet in Elsinore. A guitar instructor finds an unexpected, apt pupil in a much-favored girl who turns to music for respite. A journeying musician helps Marat to fall asleep before the troubled leader is murdered.

In these stories, music is often background entertainment for courtly folk. It's also a beguiling force that comes through amateur lyrics and masterful compositions, as appealing in formal settings as it is on impoverished streets. Details about guitars, footnotes regarding the historical characters, and lavish backgrounds result in dense narratives that favor impressions of periods. Recursive themes, as of men's personal legacies and ambition, aging, and transience, appear, while occasional bawdiness brings the music back to Earth. The stories' coy, precipitous conclusions are variously abrupt and suggestive.

La Leona is a niche story collection that spans centuries in pursuit of the "painful awareness of music's ephemerality" and its attendant joys. Through craftsmanship and performance, characters make fleeting, but resounding, connections.

KAREN RIGBY (July / August 2020)

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