

# Greek-American Classic Guitar Master Papas

**By Steve Frangos**  
TNH Staff Writer

**CHICAGO-** For some unknown reason Sophocles Papas, among modern Greeks, is one of the most overlooked of all Greek master musicians to settle on American shores. Without question Sophocles Papas was an internationally known teacher of classical guitar. The fact that Papas did not play in a traditional Greek musical genre is certainly not the issue. Dozens of Greek men and women who performed as vocalists or now play Western style instruments have been and are now praised by Greeks across the planet. That Papas, as both a musician,

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# Sophocles Papas: the Greek-American

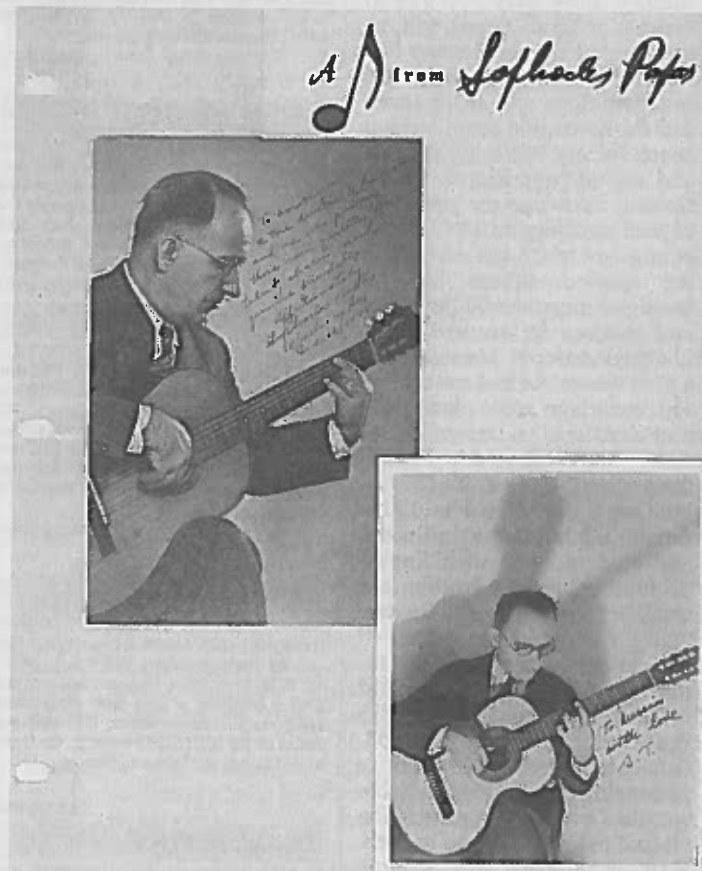
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teacher and as someone who literally established a legacy of musical instruction, continues to escape the attention of a contemporary Greek readership and audience is nothing short of what can only be labeled a cultural crime. While this might seem an overblown indictment even a mere sketch of Papas' life will not only substantiate such a claim but will simultaneously reveal his family's steadfast maintenance of his work for nearly 100 years.

Sophocles Papadopoulos was born On December 18, 1893 or 1894 in Sopiki, Greece, then a part of Albania. His father, who was a church chanter, a voice teacher, and an amateur violinist. Consequently, young Sophocles was exposed from his earliest youth to both Byzantine and Western music. At the age of 14, Papas went to live with an uncle in Cairo where he attended school, studied piano, and learned to play both mandolin and the guitar. In 1912, Papas returned to Greece where he fought as an Albanian guerrilla against the Turks in the Balkan Wars.

As published accounts report, sometime in 1913 or 1914, young Papas journeyed to the United States, where he fully intended on studying agriculture. Diverted by the outbreak of World War I, Papas first fought with the United States expeditionary forces and later joined the Greek army and fought in the Greco-Turkish wars. Sometime in the very early 1920s, Papas returned to the United States settling in Washington D.C. where he began teaching the ukulele, the banjo, the mandolin, the Hawaiian guitar, and the classical guitar. It was also at this time that Papas began to give solo performances while also frequently serving as the leader of an orchestra of fretted instruments.

Like many of his generation Papas' work ethic was phenomenal. In 1922, Papas opened his



**Sophocles Papas, a true master of classical guitar, was a genuine pioneer in the genre and highly influential throughout most of the twentieth century. Given his accomplishments, that he is not better-known remains enigmatic.**

own studio in Washington, D.C. For nearly the next 60 years Papas taught classical guitar and in so doing made the city a center of classical guitar activity in the United States. Papas' school's location and name changed and moved around the city over this 60 year period: the Papas Studios (1937-1947), the Columbia School of Music (1947-1956), the Guitar Shop (1956-1968) and finally a private studio in the DuPont Circle Building (1968-1982). Some of his better-known students included Charlie Byrd, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Jim Skinger, Aaron Shearer, Dorothy de Goede, Clare Calahan, Sharon Isbin, John Marlow, Alvino Rey, Joe Breznikar and jazz guitarist Bill

Harris. During this same period Papas also taught at American University in Washington, D.C.

Papas proved, from the day of his arrival, to be one of the most prominent figures in the Washington music scene and remained so for much of his life. Papas performed live on radio regularly on the Washington D.C. WCAP radio station. During this same period Papas organized and conducted Washington's first guitar/mandolin/banjo orchestra, and founded the Washington Guitar Society.

It may be difficult, from our vantage point in history, to fully realize how unique a pioneer Papas was in the 1920s. Papas was not only a serious per-

STORY

# n Classical Guitarist Extraordinaire

former and teacher of classical guitar music but also a dedicated promoter of this musical form through his many instructional publications and sheet music. Papas is especially recalled for his systematic and dedicated publication of the musical compositions of an amazing array of European masters. This last activity came out of necessity as much as love of the form.

While teaching classical guitar in the 1920s, Papas was initially frustrated over the utter lack of available sheet music. Never out-done by existing circumstances Papas established the Columbia Music Company, a publisher of sheet music and instructional methods for the guitar. Most notable among Papas' own publications is his

Method for the Classic Guitar. Perhaps best known is Papas' Method for the Classic Guitar and his revised edition of Fernando Sor's Sixty Short Pieces for Guitar. Additional publications include: Papas's Bach Album: Fourteen Pieces, by J. S. Bach; Arpeggio Studies, edited and fingered by Sophocles Papas; as well as Eight Lessons, fingered by Sophocles Papas. Today the company's catalog includes additional compositions and arrangements by Segovia, as well as works by Charlie Byrd, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, and a range of other musicians. Papas was a lifelong friend of Andrés Segovia, whom he met at Segovia's 1928 debut performance in North America as well as a close friend to that

of George Mason University. Prominent among these materials is his extensive correspondence with Andrés Segovia, Carl Sandburg; and his many guitar friends and students, such as Charlie Byrd and Liona Boyd.

Over the years, two of the most active members of the Columbia Music Company's Board of Directors were Elisabeth (Liz) Papas Smith, the only daughter of Sophocles Papas, and her husband Philip H. Smith, Jr. From the time that these two acquired the company in 1988, they significantly increased the catalog holdings and worked diligently to perpetuate the goals first established by Papas.

In 1998, Elisabeth Papas Smith published a biography on her father: Sophocles Papas: the Guitar, His Life. The book seeks to illustrate Papas's contribution not only to the classical guitar but also to cultural life in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s and later. The book presents Papas in his roles as teacher, publisher, judge, collector and it contains a number of photographs of Papas, his family, and his friends. This volume also includes the entire text of Papas' seminal article "Romance of the Guitar", which appeared first in The Etude Music Magazine in 1930.

In June 2006, with the death of Philip H. Smith, Jr., Thea E. Smith, first grandchild of Sophocles Papas, took over as President of the Columbia Music Company. Elisabeth Papas Smith continued to serve as Music Consultant until her own death in June 2013. Thea E. Smith, aside from her management of Columbia Music Company is herself a published novelist with *She Let Herself Go* and *Me, Myself, and Her* being her most known works to date.

It is no exaggeration to state that Sophocles Papas loved and lived classical guitar. That he was able to effectively share that love with so many others and that he continues to do so is his lasting tribute.

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Method for the Classic Guitar. Given the overall lack of available materials initially, many of these publications were Papas' own transcriptions for his students, but the range of composers and arrangers whose works were represented in the company's catalog soon grew. This company which is devoted solely to guitar music and is still publishing today and is owned and operated by Papas' family.

Columbia Music Company publishes dozens of arrange-

other music legend Carlos Montoya.

Sophocles Papas stopped teaching only around 1975, when he was in his early eighties. Right up until his death on February 26, 1986, he fostered dreams of opening a new guitar studio. Not long after his death the "Sophocles Papas Music Collection" a vast body of his private papers, compositions correspondence and other such documents were donated to the Special Collections & Archives