

# **GUILHERMINA SUGGIA – WOMAN CELLIST OF FIRE**

*written by David Johnstone*

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THE MAIN ARTICLE STARTING ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE:*

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# **SUGGIA, Guilhermina Augusta**

**Born: 1885, 27th June (Porto)**

**Died: 1950, 30th June (Porto)**

*Full name: Guilhermina Augusta Xavier de Medin Suggia*

Guilhermina Suggia was a Portuguese cellist with an important solo career and one of the most remarkable musicians of her generation. Socially she was a woman far ahead of her time. When Suggia was born, the cello was rather viewed a "masculine" instrument; probably on account of the posture required to play it, considered inappropriate for young ladies. Although two British female contemporary cellists – May Mukle and Beatrice Harrison – also held soloist careers at this time, it was the fiery character of Suggia which gained her the title of the “Queen of Cellists”.

Her first teacher was her father, Augusto Suggia, who recognised early that his daughter was a prodigy. Augusto was an unusual father for those days if one takes into account the strict Catholicism of Portugal and the very conservative views regarding women generally in Europe. He helped both his daughters pursue a musical career (her older sister Virginia was a talented pianist) and most remarkably, he dedicated his own life to further their careers. As child prodigies Virginia and Guilhermina achieved early fame playing together in local salons and clubs.

Suggia gave her first concert at the age of seven and became a member of the distinguished Moreira de Sá String Quartet as a teenager. During a visit to Lisbon living a performance, Suggia made a big impression on the then Queen of Portugal, Dona Amélia, who ensured the young cellist was awarded a scholarship. So she went to study in Leipzig with Julius Klengel, one of the best teachers of the time and a most respected musician (see a separate article in *johnstone-music* about him). Suggia had a government scholarship for a three-year stay in Leipzig, but her progress was so rapid that she graduated in less than half that time!

At 18 she debuted with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Arthur Nikisch (February 1903), and spent the next three years giving concerts in many European cities. In Vienna she played some works of Leone Sinigaglia with the composer. In Karlsbad, David Popper signed her autograph book lavishly, "*To the greatest of living cellists, Guilhermina Suggia, from your old friend David Popper.*" In Prague she met Dvorák's daughter, who told Suggia that she interpreted her father's music exactly as he would have wished. It marked the beginning of a high profile career as a cellist.

From roughly 1906 to 1913 Suggia lived in Paris with Pablo Casals. They lived out of wedlock, very surprising for the times, and she pursued her career with great determination - without formal agents she managed it mostly on her own, such as negotiating the fees, directing promotion and organising the concert schedule. With Casals, Suggia was the focus of an international circle of friends and acquaintances that included many of the most famous musicians of the day. Among the regular visitors at their house 'Villa Molitor' were Casals' trio partners Cortot and Thibaud; pianists Harold Bauer, Ferruccio Busoni, Raoul Pugno, and Mieczyslaw Horszowski; violist Pierre Monteux; and violinists Fritz Kreisler, Georges Enesco, and Eugène Ysaÿe. Casals and Suggia played together frequently, both on the concert stage and informally. Three compositions, at least, are dedicated to them: the Hungarian Emanuel Moór's Double Cello Concerto and Suite for Two Cellos, and Donald Tovey's Sonata for Two Cellos. More on their relationship is included at the end of the current article. However, Suggia's life was no less fascinating than her career. She was unconventional, for at a time when women were hardly allowed to play in orchestras (they normally got married, and once married they simply forfeited their profession), Suggia simply refused to follow these 'normal' practices.

After leaving Casals, Suggia later moved to England, where she continued to pursue a successful solo career. Probably she settled in England, after World War I, as she felt that the country was much better suited than Portugal to the kind of career she intended and was able to achieve. However, having said that, her career did not perhaps maintain its early momentum and promise. Indeed, apart from Britain and the Iberian peninsula there were few other European performances, and she probably never got into giving concerts in the United States of America. She later held duo partnerships with the pianists Leonard Borwick and George Reeves, especially playing romantic repertoire.

She did eventually return to her native country when she reached middle age. There, she finally married, a little past forty years old, Dr Carteado Mena; a man considerably older than her but well educated, open-minded and who accepted the freedom and independence that Suggia required to continue her career successfully, and having no children, this she was able to do almost until her death in 1950. The last important public appearance of Suggia's career, at the age of 64, was her performance in August of 1949 at the Edinburgh Festival with the BBC Scottish Orchestra. Throughout her long career Suggia shared the stage with many other famous musicians, who apart from Casals included Jelly d'Arányi, Ethel Smyth, Arthur Rubinstein, Wilhelm Backhaus, and Carl Orloff. The distinguished conductors she worked with included Sir Hamilton Harty, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Henry Wood, and Sir Malcolm Sargent.

When Suggia died at the age of 65, she dedicated most of her estate to the support of young cellists, and among her bequests are two prestigious scholarship funds: the Suggia Trust, administered by the Arts Council of Great Britain, and the Royal Academy of Music's Suggia Prize. The most famous recipient of the former has perhaps been Jacqueline du Pré, who aged 10 (in 1955) was awarded a scholarship that paid for six years of lessons with William Pleeth.

How did she play? She was an energetic performer who revelled in the thrill of the stage and a live audience. Truthfully, she did not like recording and was never happy with the sound of it. Therefore, precious little survived of her legendary performances. However, there still exist a few re-mastered recordings available. By all accounts she held a dramatic stage presence. She once said *"To be on the stage is to communicate with the whole body and not only with the cello"* There was a certain showmanship but her seriousness was never in doubt, and one can speak of very sensitive interpretations.



A photo of Guilhermina Suggia (photographer unknown).

She played a 1717 Strad that was an engagement gift from the wealthy publisher Edward Hudson, to whom she was engaged in 1919. Although soon braking off the engagement she kept possession of the Strad!

And what of the love with Casals?

The strange thing is that although her professional life was very public, she kept her personal life very private and chose not to share it with anyone. As previously stated, from roughly 1906 to 1913 Suggia lived in Paris with Pablo Casals. The two cellists had met in 1898, when she was 13 and he was 21. He had a summer job playing in a septet at a resort casino near Porto, and she was brought to him for weekly lessons until his return to Spain at the end of the summer. Their paths probably crossed intermittently in the ensuing years. In 1905, Casals rented 'Villa Molitor', a three-story house with a garden in the Auteil district of Paris. By 1907 they were certainly living there together. A biographer of Suggia, Anita Mercier, even suggested that she may well have had an abortion in 1907. There is no evidence that Casals and Suggia ever married – certainly no records of marriage or divorce have ever been discovered - but from 1908 onwards they certainly 'appeared' to be. For during the six years they lived together, she was listed on concert programmes as "Guilhermina Suggia-Casals" or simply as "Guilhermina Casals". Also, in correspondence with family and friends they referred to each other as husband and wife. It was an unconventional arrangement for the era, especially given that both came from rather conservative Catholic backgrounds. It was probably the case that Suggia had far more reservations about marriage than did Casals.

The relationship between Suggia and Casals was passionate, dynamic, and finally too volatile to hold together. Age and temperament differences created friction, and it was inevitable that two exceptional cellists living under the same roof would be affected by professional competition and jealousy. Troubles in the relationship reached a tumultuous climax late in the summer of 1912; male visitors (especially handsome ones!) were warned not to pay much attention to Guilhermina on account of Casal's somewhat jealous streak. It so happened that the young Donald Tovey (promising composer, pianist, and wonderful author of musical articles)

was staying with the pair near Barcelona for a few weeks. Nobody can know for sure what really happened, but somehow Tovey's presence provoked a devastating confrontation. Casals exploded in envious rage, seemingly caused by (surely falsely?!) believing that an amorous relation was developing between Tovey and Suggia. Legend says that Casals burst in on him pointing a pistol whilst Tovey was taking a bath, and that Tovey had to make an escape via the window (luckily on the ground floor) with only a sponge protecting his private parts! Needless-to-say, this caused a ten-year rift between the two men, although once reconciled Tovey later dedicated Casals a Cello Concerto later. This incident also put to finish totally the relationship between Suggia and Casals.



El punto de romper. Ya no se cogen de la mano (foto realizada hacia 1913)

When it was over, they both tried to bury the story of their romance. Casals even refused to speak of Suggia with his many interviewers and biographers; he would only state that his time with her was "*the most cruelly unhappy episode*" of his life. When Suggia spoke or wrote of Casals it was merely in a strictly professional connection, and, of course, they never played together again.

Probably the most famous image of Guilhermina Suggia is the oil painting made by the Welsh artist Augustus John. He started the project in 1920, but was not to finish it until 1923. The idea is that Suggia was interpreting one of the Bach suites 'live'! The picture was exhibited in the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburg in 1924, having being bought by an American businessman. However, later it returned to Britain where it was presented in the Tate Gallery. It is almost two metres wide and tall.

It is unfortunate that her personality and career is today only vaguely remembered by cellists as a dusty 'name' in history. Perhaps if she had produced some important cello study literature or even some original compositions (as did Grutzmacher, Klengel, and Becker, for example), her name would not have been forgotten so quickly. Perhaps her association with Casals, so intense in the heat of the moment, did not benefit her long term, although her career was still to see many successful performances. But, for all that, and possessing the special personality that she did, I feel it right to call her the "Woman Cellist of Fire".

DAVID JOHNSTONE

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