

Essay 1

Fernando Sor – Master Composer for Guitar?

"Sor (1778-1839) is one of the great masters of his era." Of course such a radical statement as this requires a radical amount of explanation as well as qualification. Sor's guitar music began appearing in print as early as 1808 and he continued to compose until his death in 1839. In 1808 Beethoven was soon to embark on his third and final period. By 1839 Schubert and Weber had been dead 11 and 13 years respectively, and Mendelssohn, Schumann, Berlioz and Chopin were well established in their careers. By comparison, Sor is indeed very obscure. Does he belong in such august company? Before answering this let us examine some of the aspects of the guitar, Sor, and his music which pertain to this question.

During his lifetime, Sor's greatest fame came as a guitarist-composer (although he did compose with moderate success for other mediums). Indeed the celebrated critic of the time, Francois-Joseph Fétis even described Sor as "The Beethoven of the Guitar" and over the years he and other critics praised Sor for his profound musicianship. Sor also performed in concert with many of the celebrated musicians of his time and even performed at least once with the young Franz Liszt! We can therefore assume that during his lifetime, Sor was highly respected and admired.

Normally, one would reason, that if music has universality and greatness, it will continue to be performed and appreciated long after its creator's era. However in Sor's case, this has not been true for the reason that the *guitar itself* suffered a drastic decline, almost to the point of extinction, during the last half of the 19th century. Therefore, from about 1840-1920 practically all of Sor's music went out of print and any existing manuscripts were lost.

Indeed, it was not until the remarkable career of Andres Segovia (1893-1987) and the 20th century renaissance of the guitar that ensued, that Sor's music began to be once again heard. Sor was easily featured more often in Segovia's concerts and recordings than all the other "guitar" composers he performed. Yet his attitude toward Sor was strangely noncommittal and ambivalent. For the most part, he chose not to play Sor's large major works, but only a number of his miniatures and oftentimes not even the best of these works. (He performed only one major work - Op. 14 - in its entirety that I know of.) And he criticized Sor as not being one of "vigorous talent," (See his annotation to his edition of 20 Studies of Sor.) while extolling the virtues of certain earlier Baroque and Renaissance composers for the instrument. (In retrospect and despite these things, Segovia probably has done more through his magnificent performances, toward the appreciation of Sor than any other performer in recent history).

The above attitude of Segovia, however, unfortunately lives on amongst guitarists to this day. The rationalization used is that Sor is a second or third rate composer and that the best of Sor's music is that which is already well known and that if Sor was a quality composer, the remainder of his music has had 150 years to be recognized. (Of course this reasoning completely ignores the fact that most of the music was not available and that there is today absolutely no performance tradition other than that which started with Segovia - if a composer's music is not heard in at least some kind of viable interpretations there is no way it can be properly evaluated.)

The next important event in the history of Sor performance occurred in 1976 when the eminent musicologist, Brian Jeffery searched, both in libraries and private collections, for the earliest published versions of Sor's complete known works for guitar and republished them in inexpensive facsimile editions. (Dr. Jeffery also wrote the first significant and only to date, biography of Sor - his work has been of immense value.) For the first time since Sor's death, guitarists had access to the bulk of Sor's music.

However with this republication has arisen the unfortunate myth that these extremely unreliable earliest editions are some sort of urtext editions of Sor's true intentions and must be followed to the letter. This, however, could not be farther from the truth. There are a great many obvious mistakes and only skeletal markings. And when there are markings they are very often questionable. All of which point up the fact that fidelity to the score was not an important issue in Sor's time. The truth is that we have no scores at present which tell us much of anything about, not only how Sor wanted his music played but in some cases, even which notes and rhythms he wanted played! We don't even have evidence of what many of the most common tempo markings (for example Andante-Allegro) truly mean.

Another important aspect of Sor is, that amongst guitarists, he is generally viewed as a Haydnesque or Mozartean classical composer and often interpreted in something of a dry, literal and restrained manner because of this. I previously mentioned that Sor wrote contemporaneously with such Romantic masters as late Beethoven and Schubert in the beginning of his career, and Schumann, Chopin and Berlioz at the end. Was Sor ultra-conservative and 50 years behind the times? The answer to this is mostly no and possibly partly yes. Certainly his concept of form was very much of the romantic 19th century. He wrote only two true classical Sonata-allegro movements (Op. 15b and the finale of his Fantasia Op. 30). His other sonatas (Op. 14, 22 and 25) show considerable freedom and individuality more typical of Romanticism than Classicism. And, in any case, he far preferred the free form Fantasy to the Sonata for his large major works. His miniatures are also very much in the Romantic time-period and style. Yet, despite his choice and freedom of forms, Sor often (but certainly not always) seemed to have a certain harmonic nostalgia for Haydn and Mozart, both of whom he expressed great admiration for. The best way that I can describe Sor is that the best of his music has the sublime simplicity of late classicism and the lyric spontaneity, exquisiteness, freedom and majestic grandeur of early romanticism. Indeed, one could divide the 19th century into two schools of compositional thought - the "avant-garde" school of Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner and Mahler and the reaction to this "avant-garde" or the more conservative and "looking back" school of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms. I view Sor as something of a pre-Mendelssohn member of this second group. Are all Sor's works unequivocal masterpieces? No, but I believe that many are and the rest are eminently worth studying, playing and hearing. (How many of the acknowledged great masters can be characterized as writing only unequivocal masterpieces?) In my mind, one thing for certain is that Sor had one of the finest lyric gifts of all composers.

And was Sor's concept of harmony truly conservative? Perhaps, but I think not. I feel that he was merely trying to write effectively for the guitar. We must remember that the guitar (especially the small 19th century instrument) was incapable of the dynamic range and thunderous sounds of the piano and symphony orchestra. Indeed the increased modulation and color of 19th century "Romantic" harmony seems to be directly related to the increased dynamic range of 19th century piano and symphonic music. Perhaps Sor felt that it simply was not practical to write for the guitar in the same harmonic manner as those contemporary masters of the piano and orchestra. Therefore it is my theory that as the 19th century wore on, the intimate, small-voiced guitar became completely misaligned with these musical tendencies and goals. And it went totally out of fashion and became temporarily obsolete largely for these reasons.

Of course all these factors make one ask the question: How should one perform Sor's music? I believe the answer is with considerably more freedom, expression and passion than has, for the most part, been done in the recent past. Sor, in his method of 1830 has much to say about the use of tone color on the guitar and even discusses how to imitate the various orchestral instruments. This use of color is something that is very uncommon amongst modern guitarists. Ironically Sor says very little about other aspects of expression, but other guitar methods from the era do recommend much use of portamento, arpeggiation of chords, and other expressive

devices which most people today consider anachronistic and completely out of style in the interpretation of the guitar music from this very era! (It never ceases to amaze me how so many modern guitarists and musicologists can be so sure that the Sor interpretations of great past artists such as Segovia were anachronistic and lacked authenticity and yet don't even consider the wealth of material and instruction from Sor's era which cries out that this music is meant to be expressed *with* such devices as dynamics, tone color, portamento, chordal arpeggiation, etc. as Segovia and others did. These same modern guitarists with the conspiratorial support of supposedly enlightened musicologists will often perform this music, sometimes on a "period" guitar, and use practically none of the above-mentioned expressive devices.)

In my own case, I readily admit that my approach to Sor is highly instinctive and personal. And it may very well have little to do with authenticity. (But then I feel that achieving authenticity - especially in Sor - is something that today is not even remotely possible.) I simply desire to get the last drop of expression from the barren and inexplicit scores that we presently have of Sor's music.

At this point I should like to return to my original question. Is Sor a great master from his era? My personal belief is - yes, his music has great spiritual qualities and value. But you, the listener cannot decide this without hearing some kind of quality performances of it. Unfortunately, due to the unusual history of the guitar, much of the best of his music is that which is the least heard. And the music that is known is often heard in questionable performances.

Therefore, I fervently hope that with these recordings of his solo guitar music, we can at least begin the process of a greater general understanding and appreciation of Sor's very individual contribution to the guitar and the entire art of music.

Essay 2

ON "PERIOD" GUITARS AND 19TH CENTURY GUITAR MUSIC

Recently a number of very fine guitarists have decided to use "original" or "period" guitars for the performance of our 19th century literature. Indeed it was but a few short years ago that we viewed the pre-Torres early 19th century guitar as something of a primitive and inferior stage in the evolution of our instrument. These players have thankfully shattered this fallacy. I recently had the pleasure of hearing several such performers and became more convinced than ever that not only do these "period" guitars have the volume to fill a good-sized auditorium, but they also have their own unique quality and beauty! Yet, often times, in the process of shattering one fallacy, new ones are created and I am afraid that this might be the case in two areas of the use of "period" instruments in the performance of 19th century guitar music

1. Size of fretboard and ease of execution

I am the owner of both a quality early 19th century instrument and a quality modern instrument (which I use on my recordings) and I simply do not find the former significantly easier to play than the latter. The string length of the 19th century guitar is 63 cm as opposed to 65 cm for the modern instrument. This is an approximate increase of 3%. It seems that it could easily be proven that average size of the human frame (and likewise the left hand) has increased at least 3% (because of vastly improved nutrition etc) since the early 19th century and we could therefore assume that the average modern person would experience no more difficulty with stretches on a modern instrument than the average person of the early 19th century experienced on the guitars of their period. Therefore it seems to me that a certain well-known guitarist's recent analogy that playing 19th century music on a modern guitar is comparable to playing the

Tchaikivsky Violin Concerto on a viola is somewhat unreasonable to say the least. (It is also grossly exaggerated because the string length on the violin is 33cm while the average viola's string length is 37.5 cm. An increase of 12%. In other words, it is *four times* the increase of the previously mentioned guitars.)

Indeed, to me, the problem seems to be more an athletic one rather than a fret-distance one. It is my belief that Sor and others of the period were great virtuosos and left-hand techniques such as stretching were areas in which they reigned supreme. In order for these musicians to produce the high quality compositions in their respective styles that they did, it was an absolute necessity that they develop their left hands thusly. (A more recent example of this is Augustin Barrios who likewise has tremendous stretches in his music - and he did it on a modern 65-cm guitar with higher tension steel strings. Thus the argument that 19th century guitar music was tailor-made for the low-tension short fingerboard "period" guitar is also somewhat refuted by the later example of Barrios!)

One can, I believe, certainly play this music effectively on either the modern 65 cm instrument or the 63 cm "period" instrument only if one is willing to devote years of practice to develop the necessary technique. I should like to close this point by saying that despite the fact that certain early 19th century guitar music may possibly be slightly easier on the period instrument, one should not use this instrument for this reason. One should only use it if he or she feels that, after much soul-searching and experimentation, it is a more expressive instrument for the music which is being played.

2. Period Authenticity and/or Composer Approval

The period instrument movement of recent years has largely rationalized itself with the notion that quality performances of the music of a certain era should at least attempt to have the same sound as the composer or listener of that period might have experienced. That is, the music must be performed on the exact instrument for which it was written, amongst other things. This notion (or dogma as the case may be) has been carried to such an extreme that not only is it "wrong" to perform lute and vihuela music on the guitar, or harpsichord music (such as Bach or Scarlatti) on the piano, but even the artistic validity of such acknowledged masters as harpsichordist Wanda Landowska and lutenist Julian Bream has been seriously questioned because of the allegedly unauthentic instruments and techniques they used! These tendencies are carried into the 19th century by the insistence that London and Paris based Sor should be performed on a Panormo or copy thereof, while the Vienna based Giuliani should be performed on a Stauffer or copy thereof. Of course the belief in this notion causes an incredible dilemma to today's touring guitarist, even if he has the personal wealth (which is unfortunately not the case for many of us) to own quite an array; of quality "period" instruments. He either must devote himself to playing only one composer or he must somehow (and very clumsily and expensively, I might add) carry all these instruments with him on his world tours if he wishes to play the entire gamut of music which, just a few years ago (in our evident innocence and ignorance), was quite simply played on the modern "Torres" style guitar. Indeed, I have seen articles in recent guitar journals stating that the modern "Torres" style guitar has today become the universally used instrument, not because of its superiority, but instead because of the pro-Spanish prejudice of such musicians as Tarrega, Llobet and finally Segovia!

While there may be some truth to all of the above, it seems to me that besides the previously mentioned problems of wealth and travel, there is one immense problem - that is that we have no idea what Sor, Giuliani, Regondi and other 19th century guitarists might have sounded like on these instruments. What kind of tone, vibrato, color etc did they produce? How did they make these instruments sing? Indeed all this has much to do with how one learns to express oneself on an instrument and I can think of no greater truism than that *none of us work in a vacuum*. We can indeed learn very little or not even begin to develop a personal style without first learning from the sounds and examples of our contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The

earliest guitarist that practically any one of us has heard extensively is Andres Segovia. Following him we have Alirio Diaz, Alexander Lagoya, Ida Presti, Julian Bream, John Williams, Oscar Ghiglia and many others who have, to a greater or lesser extent, been influenced by Segovia. Thus when these above-mentioned "period" guitarists (or anyone else of their generation for that matter) were in their guitaristically formative years, the above is the guitaristic "soundscape" that influenced them - a "soundscape" that included only nail players on post-Torres type guitars. They developed their personal styles by reacting to, either positively or negatively, these sounds around them. (Of course this also includes the sounds of other instrumentalists such as violinists, pianists, vocalists etc. - this process of influences is often very subconscious and therefore very difficult to pinpoint and analyze.) Thus when they play Sor on a Panormo or Regondi or Giuliani on a Stauffer copy they are translating their personal styles, developed on a modern instrument and derived from contemporary techniques and sources, to an instrumental design that, for whatever reason, became obsolete over 100 years ago. Now I want the reader to understand that I am not criticizing these performers and indeed I am full of admiration for certain of them. But I make the point that their use of the 19th century instrument is not necessarily any more authentic than if another guitarist or even these performers themselves, decided to and/or preferred to perform this music on the modern guitar!

Incidentally, a very few guitarists, in their quest for authenticity in the performance of Sor, have decided to not only use the "period" guitar but also use a no-nail, flesh technique for tone production because Sor himself played this way. I must admit that I have never heard satisfactory performances using this approach, yet I have no doubt that Sor himself was a very great and musical performer and had a fine technique and beautiful sound. But the modern performer trying to emulate Sor's performance style has practically nothing to go on. To comprehend this, let us imagine a person trying to play in the "authentic" Segovia style without having heard him in person and having heard no recordings and only having a brief and vague description of his use of nails for tone production to go on. Indeed, it seems to be impossible for the guitarists of today to effectively reproduce the "Segovia Style" with the beautiful tone, vibrato, color etc. *with* all the above-mentioned examples and information to help them, therefore it appears that the problems of this no-nail approach to Sor are far, far, too Herculean for even the most talented of today's guitarists to overcome!

All of this brings me to a hypothetical question: Given the virtual impossibility of achieving authenticity that a performer faces today, which guitar, "period" or modern, would meet the approval of the 19th century guitar composers? Of course this is pretty much an unanswerable question, but we do know that almost all composers throughout the history of music have in many ways been much more lenient toward changes in instrumentation than we are today. And we also know that invariably these composers approved of the most brilliant, expressive and poetic performances of their work despite the often wide disparity between the composer's original conception and the personality and conception of the performer. However I know that they would not approve of some of the dead, but musicologically "correct" performances that we witness today!

A number of years ago, upon learning of my desire to record the complete works of Sor using a modern guitar, a certain guitarist and musicologist wrote me saying:

"It is a pity you don't record your Sor on an original instrument. I find playing an early guitar a different and enlightening experience. The early instruments necessitate a different approach both musically and technically as they respond differently from their modern counterparts. Thus many "secrets" in the music are automatically revealed. Pianists experience the same when changing from a modern Steinway to an early piano when playing Mozart."

At the time, I took this gentleman to heart and vowed that before I committed any more of Sor's music to the permanence of tape, I should settle this issue once and for all in my own

mind. I proceeded to purchase a beautiful German guitar (circa 1820) and I spent many, many enjoyable hours playing my new "old" instrument. But, while I do not doubt the sincerity of this gentleman and that it has been educational to play this guitar, this automatic revelation of "secrets" never occurred and I came to the conclusion that, for me at least, the modern guitar is a far better tool for the expression of Sor's music. Undoubtedly other fine musicians may have had this somewhat magical revelation of secrets, and for this, or for whatever reason, use the early 19th century guitar and consider it the best tool for the expression of Sor. What would Sor think if he were to magically and automatically reveal his secret thoughts today? My personal (but unmagical, unautomatic and non-secretively revealed) opinion is that he would opt for the most musical, brilliant, expressive and poetic performances of his music and wouldn't give two hoots what instrument it was done on. With this I rest my case.

SOR (1778-1839) - BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

It is not my intention to provide any extensive biographical information on Sor's life. For this I would recommend Fernando Sor - Composer and Guitarist by Brian Jeffery (Tecla Ed. TE051) Sor, a Catalan by birth and upbringing evidently began the study of the guitar at an early age and received training in music at the Monastery of Montserrat. At first he embarked on a military rather than musical career and he originally had loyalty to the Spanish Bourbon monarchy of Charles IV. However, sometime after Napoleon's invasion in 1808 he, like many of his compatriots, made the decision of joining a group known as the afrancesados. (A group of Spaniards – especially Barcelona Catalans - who honestly believed in and followed the ideals of the French Revolution as then represented by Napoleon.) Thus after Napoleon's defeat in 1813, not only was his military career ended but he was permanently forced into exile from his native land, spending the rest of his life in Paris except for eight years in London. Yet it is very unfortunate that, to this day, many Spaniards still blame Sor for joining the afrancesados and following Napoleon and because of this refuse to accept him as the great Spanish artist that he was!

At one point Sor made part of his income from teaching voice and evidently even wrote a method on singing. (This work has since been lost.) It seems that his interest in voice accounts for much of his lyric style of writing for guitar. Sor also taught guitar and wrote a method for it. This work discusses the instrument from both a technical and compositional point of view and even has a partial analysis of Haydn's Creation within it! It is not perhaps, the most practical method for learning the instrument but is perhaps the most erudite discussion of the guitar in existence.

THE SOLO GUITAR MUSIC OF SOR

Sor's solo guitar music may be loosely categorized in seven forms and/or styles. **1. Sonata** - his sonata expositions and recapitulations rarely follow traditional form yet are filled with strong lyricism and thematic material. The developments are short but effective with rich and surprising modulations. Sor wrote four sonatas, Op. 14 and 15b each in one movement, and Op. 22 and 25 each in four movements. **2. Fantasia** – Sor's fantasias are multi-movement large-scale works often (but just as often not) containing a slow introductory movement, a set of variations and a coda or finale. He wrote 13 works entitled "Fantasia:" Op. 4, 7, 10, 12, 16, 21, 30, 40, 46, 52,

56, 58, and 59. **3. Variation** - Sor was a wonderful composer of variations. His invention and lyricism often seem inexhaustible. Besides the variations in his sonatas and fantasias he wrote 12 sets; Op. 3, 9, 11a, 11c, 15a, 15c, 20, 26, 27 and 28, and 2 sets without opus number. **4. Etude** - Sor may well have been the earliest 19th century creator of concert etudes. Indeed one should compare his etudes to such contemporaries as Cramer and Kreutzer to understand this point. Sor's etudes are always musical and show his remarkable gift for melody and form. Sor's etudes range from low intermediate to virtuoso levels of proficiency. He wrote 121 etudes in 6 sets; Op. 6, 29, 31, 35, 44 and 60. **5. Minuet** - These works in both form and style are unique. They are in binary form and full of charm, elegance and above all, Sor's remarkable lyrical gift. Indeed they often seem to be a 19th century throwback to the earliest baroque minuets. Sor wrote 35 minuets. Besides the 12 of Op. 11 the remainder are scattered throughout his various collections of short works. **6. Other miniature forms** - Sor composed about 85 other miniatures - waltzes (many), marches, siciliennes etc. They are found in the collections of Op. 1, 2, 5, 8, 13, 17, 18, 23, 24, 32, 33, 36, 42, 43, 47, 48, 51, 57 and works without Op. number. **7. Other large-scale works** - Serenade Op. 37, Caprice Op. 50 and Morceau de Concert Op. 54.

WHY INGRES?

Despite the fact that it is very debatable whether the two artists even met, most people have somehow linked Sor with Goya as sharing the same aesthetic between the sister arts of music and painting. This is made evident by the fact that a great many Sor recordings have prints of Goya's masterpieces on their jackets. Perhaps this is because both were Spaniards from roughly the same period. However the truth is that, unlike say Debussy and Monet, from an artistic standpoint, Sor and Goya had very little in common. Sor had a certain conservative "nostalgia" for earlier styles not only of Haydn and Mozart, but also Renaissance and Baroque music, while Goya was very much the progressive artist who had a great influence on Picasso, among others. On the other hand, Ingres, like Sor, was an early romantic artist who "looked back" to past styles. Not only was he strongly influenced by the great classicist Jacques-Louis David (with whom he studied) but also by the great Renaissance painter, Raphael and early Baroque master, Nicolas Poussin. Therefore I have chosen Ingres as the great 19th century painter whose work is aesthetically closest to Sor despite their differing national origins. It is prints of *his* masterpieces that adorn the covers of this series of recordings

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There are only two known portraits of Sor. One from about 1815 by Innocent-Louis Goubaud and an 1835 pen and ink drawing by a certain Adam. The two pictures are so different that one cannot tell that they even represent the same person. While the former is by far the best known of the two, I have chosen the latter as the one that most represents Sor as I visualize him. Therefore it is this drawing that is seen throughout the documentation to these recordings.