

~ Some introductory remarks on
19th-century guitar performance practice ~

Part I - Technique

Rob MacKillop©

Most discussion among players of the modern classical guitar regarding the early 19th-century guitar has been backward looking, that is, either looking at ways of playing this repertoire on a modern instrument in a modern style, or how to imitate the stylistic features of the period on a modern guitar. I will focus instead on coming towards Sor and his contemporaries from before their period, as clearly each age either develops what has gone before or rejects it completely and strikes out in a new way. I will therefore delve into the roots of the style, uncovering the development of technique, instrument and repertoire. I will not consider the uses of this for the modern classical guitar, but will present instead (for better or worse) a more purist approach.

Two of the guitarists we know most about both happen to have been Spaniards, and both happened to have lived in the same hotel for a few years. They were good friends who supported each other's efforts and even composed music for each other to play. Despite this, they had radically different approaches both to technique and to music itself. Their names are Fernando Sor and Dionisio Aguado.

Sor's technique is very interesting. He discusses it in his 'Méthode pour la Guitare' – published in Paris in 1830, when Sor was 52 years old. It was published in an English translation two years later as the 'Method for the Spanish Guitar'.

It is difficult to discuss Sor's technique without first mentioning its relationship with *harmony*. Indeed, harmony is fundamental to Sor's approach to guitar playing. He mentions it often in his *Méthode*:

“...I merely indicate the route which I have followed in order to produce results from the guitar which have obtained for me the approbation of harmonists, people the most difficult to satisfy and to dazzle in regard to music.”ⁱ

“...I found myself in a position to see a figured base, and, without taking up the guitar, to indicate the harmonic progression by the configurations alone.”ⁱⁱ

“I love music, I feel it: the study of harmony and counterpoint having familiarised me with the progression and nature of chords and their inversions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“...the entire key to the mastery of the guitar (as an instrument of harmony) consists in the knowledge of the thirds and sixths.”^{iv}

“...I almost always make the fingering which I employ for melody depend on that which I use for harmony.”^v

“A guitarist who is a harmonist, will always have an advantage over one who is not.”^{vi}

So Sor was proficient in reading figured bass, in other words he was able to improvise within the stylistic parameters common to his day. I shall talk much more about this improvisational aspect in the second part of this introductory essay, suffice for the moment to say that figured-bass reading clearly survived from the baroque era into the early and mid classical periods. There are examples of figured bass in the Georgina Gregory guitar manuscript from Edinburgh, c.1835. At the other end of the scale, we might say, Beethoven^{vii} spent many of his formative years playing from a figured bass. C.P.E Bach mentions^{viii} how modern players – i.e. the new post-baroque players – had to adapt their style somewhat:

“Our present taste has brought about an entirely new use of harmony. Our melodies, embellishments, and manner of performance often call for unusual chords. At times they must be played in few parts, again, in many. Thus, the range of the accompanist’s duties has greatly increased and the recognised rules of thorough bass, which must often be modified, are no longer sufficient.”

Sor was clearly in accord with Bach’s sentiments. He indicates obliquely that his accompaniment style – the only way he played the guitar in his formative years – was quite advanced:

“At first I took up this instrument merely as an instrument of accompaniment; but, from the early age of sixteen years, I was shocked to hear it said by those who professed to have but little talent, ‘I only play to accompany’. I new that a good accompaniment supposes in the first place a good base, chords adapted to it, and movements as much as possible approximating those of an orchestral score or those of the pianoforte; things which, in my opinion, afforded a much greater proof of mastery on the instrument than all those sonatas which I heard with long violin passages, without harmony or even devoid of base, excepting the base found on the open strings”

Sor is here referring to what we might call the early Italian classical guitar style, which has been argued by Thomas Heck, James Tyler and others, as indeed having developed from violinists who also played the guitar, and who naturally wrote their guitar music in the same treble clef that they used for notating their violin music – which is why we still use the treble clef for guitar notation today. But that is another story.

In a footnote to Sor’s discussion of harmony, he makes reference to Federico Moretti as being the only other guitarist he knew who had developed a harmonic approach to the guitar, as opposed to a melodic approach. Moretti’s first book, *Principj per la Chitarra* – (*Principles of the Guitar*) of 1792, was reprinted almost exactly as written in 1799 – when Sor was 21 years of age – but adapted for the 6-course, double-strung guitar “because this is the instrument generally played in Spain”. It is, by the way, entirely likely that both Sor and Aguado played the 6-course double-strung guitar in the early part of their careers.

I am awaiting delivery of the Spanish version of Moretti's book, and must in the meantime work from the Italian version. After naming the notes, showing where they are to be found and providing exercises in scales of unisons and octaves, Moretti moves quickly on to chords. He provides four versions – in different positions – of each of the major and minor chords, and also sevenths and diminished chords. Then he demonstrates a number of cadences – I IV V I – in major and minor keys, showing good voice leading, using inversions as well as root positions. This all helps to develop a sense of key – the foundation of tonal music. Finally he moves on to examples of arpeggios with indications for right-hand fingering, and it is here that we find many interesting correlations to the right-hand techniques of Sor and Aguado.

Moretti *never* uses the annular finger. Consider arpeggio No.24: It is a rising four-note arpeggio of a basic C major chord. It is fingered thumb, index, middle, middle. No modern player would consider such a technique. Now consider No.37. Here the three bass notes are all played with the thumb. The first string is plucked by the middle finger, and the index finger plays both the second and third strings consecutively. This last technique of raking the index finger over two strings is mentioned in Aguado's 'New Guitar Method' of 1843, but in the context of playing thirds:

“The forefinger can also pluck the first and second strings when they have to be sounded together.”^{ix}

The technique was a common lute technique in both the Renaissance and Baroque periods for the playing of chords of more than three notes. The influence of the techniques from these periods can be more clearly seen in Sor.

Sor regarded his own technique as being different from that generally found. He seems to have had more in common with lute technique than what we might call the more modern technique advanced by Aguado and others. He is careful to point out that his technique is derived from the music:

“...I shall never say to the reader – *This is what is necessary to be done* – but – *this is what I found necessary to do...*”^x

On page 20 of his *Method*, he makes a statement which draws him right back into Renaissance lute technique:

“This fingering has for its object, not only to economise as much as possible the number of fingers, but *to make my operation conduce to the expression of the musical accent.*”

...and on page 22 mentions never plucking:

“...on unaccented times of the measure, reserving the thumb for the accented notes.”

And, finally (on page 33), the choice of finger depends on the accent:

“I observe whether the musical accent be on the highest or lowest (string).”

These last three quotations are extremely important. In Renaissance lute technique, generally the only right-hand indication is for the index finger, which is reserved for the weak beats. This is an extension of the Renaissance philosophical theory that Man is ‘at one’ with the universe, at least in the dimensions of his body (think of Leonardo Da Vinci’s drawing of Man with legs and arms outstretched, surrounded by a circle representing the heavenly bodies). There is a natural inequality in strength in the fingers of the hand. The thumb is heavier than the index, and when playing a lute has the added weight of gravity to increase its power. The middle finger is longer than the index finger and is therefore also stronger. Therefore the natural inequality of the hand can match the inequalities of stress within a musical bar. Therefore Man and Nature (represented by musical sounds) are as ‘one’.

This technique was perfect for the early Renaissance lute but was less useful on the larger 13-course Baroque lutes, where the thumb is often stretched far away from the index finger, and, quite frankly, one is happy to just play the notes with the nearest available finger. Because of these technical difficulties, Baroque players developed the use of slurs, wherein the second note is somewhat quieter than the first, thereby reproducing the inequality of stress. Slurs are essential to Sor’s technique (page 21):

“As to the right hand, I have never aimed to play scales staccato, or detached, nor with great rapidity, because I have been of (the) opinion that I could never make the guitar perform violin passages satisfactorily, while, by taking advantage of the facility which it offers for connecting or slurring the sounds, I could imitate somewhat better the passages of an air or melody. For this reason, I play only the note which commences every group composing the passage.”

Unlike Moretti, Sor did employ the use of the annular finger, but very sparingly:

“I therefore establish as a rule of fingering, for the right hand, to employ commonly only three fingers [*pim*]...and to use the fourth [*a*] only for playing a chord in four parts...”^{x1}

He clearly considered the annular finger as being quite weak and not to be exposed (page 33):

“...if I rarely use the third finger of the right hand for harmony (i.e. arpeggios and chords), *I forbid it entirely for melody.*”

Sor also mentions placing the pinkie on the soundboard of the guitar. It is not something he does constantly, but finds it a useful technique in certain passages when the thumb approaches the second and first strings. This is clearly derived from lute and baroque guitar technique, and is referred to also by Aguado in his *New Guitar Method*:

“Some rest the little finger of the right hand on the soundboard so as to give sureness to the hand when plucking. This may have been useful while the guitar was not in a fixed position, but now that it is played on a tripod I do not consider the support necessary because the fingers of the right hand depend on the support given by the forearm and wrist”

Aguado is here referring to his patented tripod, designed to hold the guitar still and away from the body, thereby increasing volume and resonance. Presumably, if the tripod invented and sold by Aguado was not available, the pinkie support would be deemed ‘necessary’. Giulio Regondi is another player who utilised this technique. It is a technique which is usually viewed with horror by present-day classical guitar teachers, as it can restrict the action of the annular finger. Having played the lute with just such a technique for the past ten years, I feel quite comfortable with it. The touch on the soundboard is *very* light and frequently rises off the soundboard altogether. As both lute technique and Sor’s guitar technique avoid as much as possible the use of the annular finger, it is not problematic and, indeed, can help relax the muscles of the hand.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that Sor found alternating the index and middle fingers at high speeds quite difficult without employing slurs. In his *Method*, he even admits to having re-written a passage for guitar in Hummel’s *Sentinelle*, because it was too difficult. The passage in question was actually written by Giuliani and is in the fast violin-style of mainly single notes. The great master of this style of playing was Aguado. In *Les Deux Amis*, a duet written by Sor for he and Aguado to play, Sor included a fast variation for Aguado to play:

“Only the part of Mr Aguado has a very rapid variation, but it is in single notes and *in the style most known*” (my italics).

Aguado published 3 ‘methods’: 1) Escuela de Guitarra (Madrid, 1825) 2) Nouvelle Méthode de Guitarre, Op.6 (Paris, 1834), and 3) Nuevo Método para Guitarra (Madrid, 1843). I have only studied this last one as it is the only version to have been translated into English (Tecla Editions).

Setting aside Aguado’s use of the tripod, I shall concentrate on his right-hand technique. Unlike Sor, Aguado employed a nail technique. He is very careful to describe exactly how the finger strikes the string:

“...it must be understood that the strings are not plucked only with the nails, because the sound would not then be very agreeable. The string is *first* played with the fingertip *using the part nearest the thumb*, the finger slightly extended (not bent as for plucking with the fingertip only), and then the string is immediately slid along the nail...If the nails are used, runs can be performed very rapidly and clearly. There is an important exception, however. Persons with very long fingers should not play with the nails, because this gives each finger more leverage on the strings and thus diminishes the force used.”

His description of the string sliding along the nail sounds very contemporary and is fairly indistinguishable from the technique used by almost all professional classical guitarists today. As this tutor from 1843 is the first time it is mentioned, and as this same tutor was used by Tárrega, Segovia, Bream, Williams and other giants of the modern classical guitar, it is fair to say that Aguado's *Nuevo Método* is the starting place for modern guitar playing. But I am in danger here of doing what I said I would avoid doing at the start of this essay – looking backwards to see what can be used today on the modern guitar. Aguado's *Nuevo Método* has much more of interest to the student of early performance practice on period instruments. Not least in the area of improvisation, which I shall turn to in Part II.

Rob MacKillop ©2003

ⁱ Fernando Sor, *Method for the Spanish Guitar* (Tecla 1995, p.5).

ⁱⁱ Idem. p.6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Idem. p.5.

^{iv} Idem. p.28.

^v Idem. p.28.

^{vi} Idem. p.42

^{vii} David Wyn Jones, *The Life of Beethoven*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

^{viii} C.P.E Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments (1762)*. Translated and edited by William J. Mitchell. Cassell and Company, 1949. p.174.

^{ix} Dionisio Aguado. *Nuevo Método para Guitarra* (Madrid, 1843). Quoted from, 'New Guitar Method' published in English by Tecla, 1981 and 1995.

^x Idem. p.7.

^{xi} Idem. p.11.