

~ Some introductory remarks on
19th-century guitar performance practice ~
Part II - Improvisation
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We have already noted that Fernando Sor was proficient in figured bass reading, which is a form of improvisation, and one that leads to a good grounding for composition. I shall contribute a paper to the subject in the not too distant future. Aguado contributes two other aspects of the improviser's art: decoration of the written score, and the improvised prelude. I will discuss each in turn.

Decoration

“There is another kind of ornament which consists in varying the mechanism of some melodies; this should be simple so as not to distort the main idea, and like all types of ornament must be dictated by good taste. In the following example from Sor's *Fantasia*, opus 7, the second bar has been varied in five ways.”¹

Andante (original by Sor)

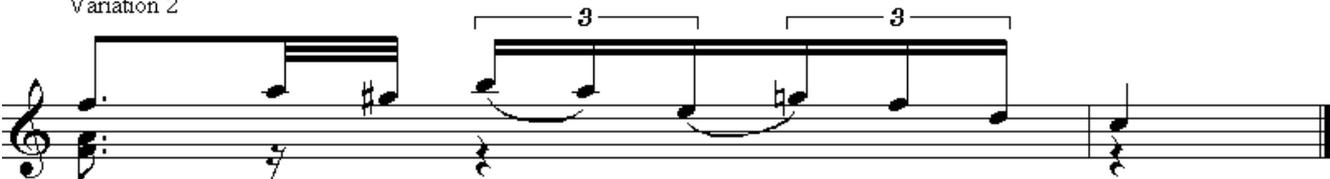


(Aguado)

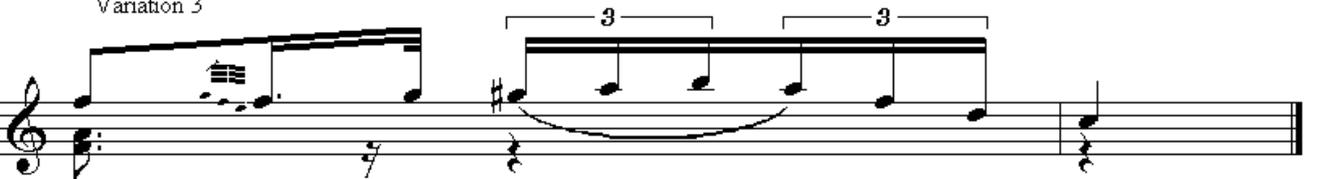
Variation 1

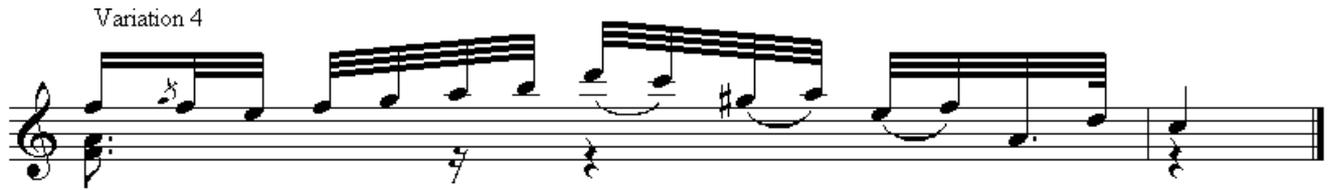


Variation 2



Variation 3





Very few of today's players – even so-called early-music performers – are willing to take the plunge into this kind of decoration, yet an even cursory reading of the various books on stylistic practice would reveal that it was quite a normal, everyday thing to do, which is possibly why Aguado barely mentions it. Compare also Aguado's 'version' of Sor's 'Grand Solo'. The underlying technical approach used in these instances by Aguado can best be learned through a study of his Preludes.

Prelude

Improvisation in 19th-century guitar performance practice is a very large topic. Later I shall discuss the improvised cadenza, but here I limit myself to a few passing comments by Aguado, and begin a study of the improvised prelude. In Chapter II, paragraph 6 of his methodⁱⁱ, Aguado mentions that the guitar is 'an instrument suited for improvisation', and the 'Preludes or indications of the key in which a piece is to be played'ⁱⁱⁱ are excellent examples of Aguado's improvisational style. Although a very common practice since medieval times, the improvised prelude has generally fallen out of use over the last century or so. I would like to see a return of the practice, and suggest that instead of slavishly copying and memorising Aguado's examples, we study their content with a view to making our own.

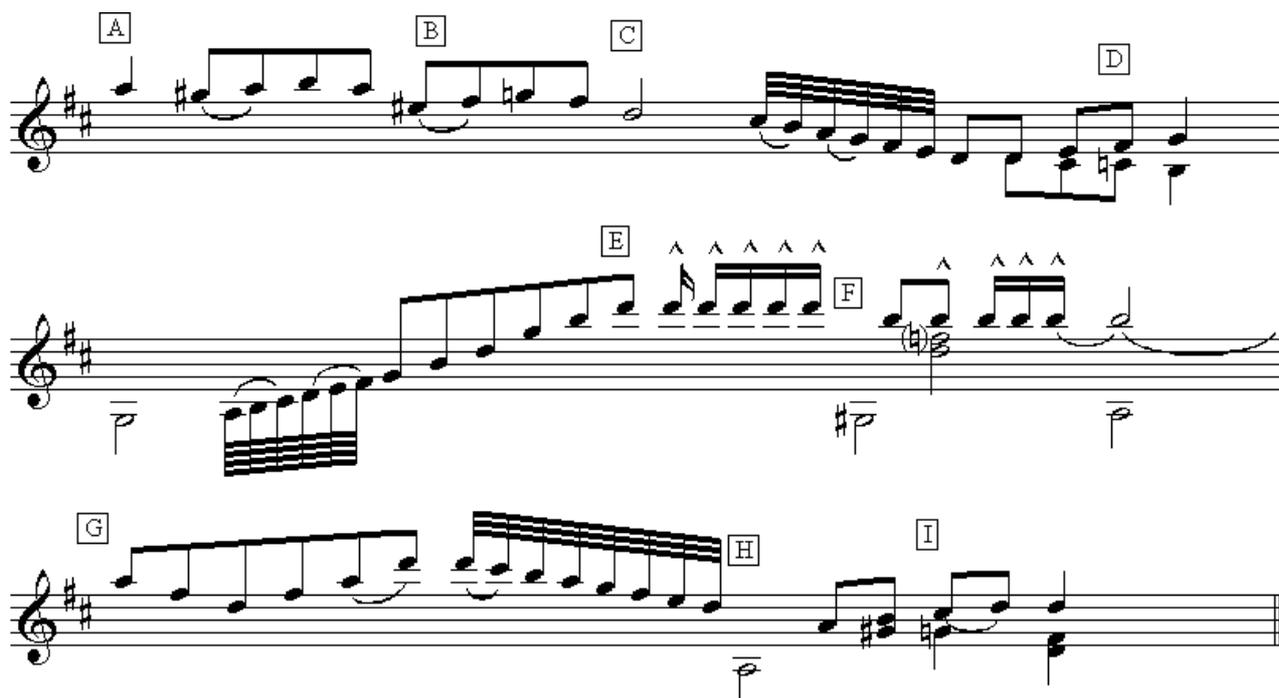
Aguado gives twenty-two Preludes in the keys of C, G, A, D and E, but mentions that as some of them involve no open strings, they could be shifted chromatically to other keys. Furthermore, certain Preludes 'can be played in the minor, if care is taken to make the third and sixth notes of the scale minor'. In other words, Aguado supplies us with enough material to perform a Prelude in any key, major or minor.

The first Prelude is the easiest, and in truth is quite banal. Despite being overly simple, it does what it is supposed to do, and what that is is revealed in Aguado's subtitle: ...*indications of the key in which a piece is to be played*. The simplest way to do that is to state merely two chords: the tonic and the dominant.



Prelude 1 by Aguado. New Guitar Method (Tecla, p. 144)

Of course, more complicated examples are given. Prelude 16 is a fine and not untypical Prelude and will serve us as a good example to follow:



Prelude 16 by Aguado. New Guitar Method (Tecla, p. 145)

Crotchet beats 1 to 7 play with our inner demand for the establishment of a key. It starts on a single note, A [see figure A], the actual dominant note of the as yet unknown key. Of course, the audience does not know what key the piece is in. Is it the tonic, we wonder? The following four quavers seem to indicate that we *are* in the key of A major, but the G# is actually a chromatically sharpened lower auxiliary, as will be made evident from the next four quavers [figure B]. Here we have a repeat figuration, the high point of which (the G natural) is the seventh of the dominant seventh chord in the key of D major. The establishment of D major as the key is emphasised by both the minim time value [figure C] given to the first sounding of the note D (the longest-held note so far) and the sudden demisemiquaver D major run plummeting an octave to another D. But as soon as D major is firmly established, Aguado introduces a bass C natural [figure D] which indicates a modulation to the subdominant key of G major – emphasised again by a minim G followed by a fast

hemidemisiquaver diatonic run up the G major scale to another G. The next quaver passage seems innocent enough: a simple G major arpeggio up to a high D. But is this D [figure E] the 5th note of G major, or is it a re-establishment of the tonic? Aguado repeats the note several times in short stabs (the inverted V shape above the note is described in paragraph 136^{iv} by Aguado to indicate that the note must be quickly silenced, ‘by placing the same finger which plucked the note on the string immediately after’). Our uncertainty (conscious or otherwise) of the function of this high D is resolved in a surprise plummet to a low G# minim [figure F] (the true note length is uncertain), indicating a modulation to the dominant key of A major established at the start of the third line. Or is it? The high B minim falls as we expect to an A [figure G], but is now actually the fifth of a D major quaver arpeggio, which is followed by a descending demisiquaver scale run of D (not A) major. This has only served to delay the actually sounding of the dominant chord of A major, indicated by a low A minim [figure H] followed by A and G# quavers, before the G natural indicates the final return to the tonic D major [figure I].

The above might have confused the issue or clarified it, depending on your own theoretical knowledge/appreciation, or otherwise. In its simplest form, we could say that Aguado merely points out the Tonic, Subdominant and Dominant areas of the key, much as Bach did in the Prelude to the so-called First Cello Suite, and indeed many of Aguado’s Preludes do just that. We could do something similar. The following outlines a method for building a very basic improvisation:

Basic Model for an Improvised Prelude

Step 1: choose a key. Try A major, a good guitar key. (See example score below).

Step 2: choose a chordal outline you wish to explore. Keeping it simple to start with, try the following: A D E A, in other words, Tonic, Subdominant, Dominant, Tonic. Play the chordal outline in simple block chords over and over until you can feel instinctively where you are heading.

Step 3: establish the tonic. This can be done simply by just playing an A major chord, or we could ‘play’ with our listener’s expectations by slightly delaying it (as in Prelude 16 above).

Step 4: Think of the many ways one could connect the first chord, A major, to the second chord in our outline, D major. Here it is a good idea to not merely land on D major, but to actually *modulate* to it. The simplest and most effective way of modulating to a new key is to introduce the Dominant seventh of the new key. In our example we must change the G# of the A major scale into a G natural which now functions as the seventh of an A7 chord, the Dominant seventh of D major. You might do a simple arpeggio of A major with a G natural on top which falls to an F# on top of a simple D major chord.

Step 5: establish your new key by either playing an arpeggio or playing an ascending or descending octave scale (with the notes of the new key – in our case, D major).

Step 6: connect the second chord of our original chord outline to the third chord – D major to E major. If we are modulating, we can again go via the dominant seventh of the new key. The dominant seventh of E major is B7, which includes a D#. We must therefore change our D to a D# before settling on the E major chord. You can do this in a similar way to Step 4, or you can try something different.

Step 7: establish the new key (as in Step 5): E major.

Step 8: connect the last two chords of our original chordal outline: E major and A major. As we have established the key of E major, we must turn it into an E7 chord if we want to modulate back to the original tonic, A major. In effect, this means introducing the note D natural – the seventh of an E7 chord. Again, we can play an E7 arpeggio or a scale run in A major from E up to D, which then heralds:

Step 9: Establish the tonic. This could be a simple statement of the chord of A major or something more elaborate. Aguado invariably opts for a simple statement of the final tonic chord.

It is important to remember that Aguado mentions that these preludes are not to be played strictly in time: a sideways hint that they must have a feeling of having been improvised on the spot, despite being written down by Aguado, or in our case, despite being ‘worked out’ before hand:

Paragraph 280. In these preludes the metre is not strictly observed. The value of the notes serves only to give an idea of the respective speed at which a piece is to be played.^v

[More will be said on this aspect of ‘faking it’ when we come to discuss the improvised cadenza.]

And there you have it: a simple prelude based on Aguado’s practice. We need to explore ways of elaborating on our basic (rather boring, it must be said) outline, making it less obvious and more interesting. And that is the essence of a good prelude: to find interesting ways of connecting the two or three chords which well and truly establish a chosen key. And we must keep in mind that we are actually improvising a prelude *to* something, and give little hints, quotations maybe, from the main piece. We also need to be aware of the harmonic style of the composer. Mertz, for instance, might have used a minor chord for the subdominant. Look also at the many ways of connecting two chords, say A and E, in the works of Giuliani – there must be over a thousand examples! By memorising and varying some of these examples rhythmically and melodically, we can internalise them and eventually make them part of our own early 19th-century armory of improvising gestures (this is not



The other type of cadenza can be found in the concertos of, among others, Mauro Giuliani.

The longer cadenza

Written only 20 years before Giuliani's Op.30, D.G. Türk's influential *Clavierschule* of 1789 provides us with a summary of good cadenza practice. His ten rules^{vii} should be studied and memorised:

1. The cadenza should reinforce the impression made by the composition by providing a brief summary of it; this may be achieved by weaving some of the important ideas from the piece into the cadenza.
2. The cadenza should not be difficult for its own sake, but rather contain thoughts that are suited to the main character of the composition.
3. The cadenza should not be too long, especially in sad compositions.
4. Modulations should be avoided or used only in passing, and should never stray beyond the main keys established in the piece.
5. The cadenza, in addition to expressing a unified sentiment, must have some musical variety to maintain the listener's interest.
6. Ideas should not be repeated, either in the same key or in different keys.
7. Dissonances, even in single-voiced cadenzas, must be properly resolved.
8. A cadenza need not be learnt, but should show 'novelty, wit and abundance of ideas'.
9. In a cadenza the performer should not stay in one tempo or metre too long, but should give the impression of 'ordered disorder'. A cadenza may be usefully compared to a dream, in which events that have been compressed into the space of a few minutes make an impression, yet lack coherence and clear consciousness.
10. A cadenza should be performed as though it had just occurred to the performer. Nevertheless, it is risky to improvise a cadenza on the spot, and much safer to write it down or at least sketch it in advance.

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key of D major. The first two staves feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and 'sf' (sforzando) markings. The third staff continues the pattern with a different rhythmic grouping.

Giuliani then plays with this ambiguity before emphatically announcing a high position E7 chord with the 7th on top:

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The second staff shows a high-position E7 chord with a 7th on top, indicated by a fermata.

Finally there is an E7 scale run complete with chromatic lower auxiliaries before quietly and calmly stating the open 5th string, the A we have been waiting for since the cadenza commenced.

A single staff of musical notation showing an E7 scale run with chromatic lower auxiliaries, followed by a quiet and calm statement of the open 5th string (A). The tempo marking "slargandosi a poco a poco" is present above the staff.

One would have to read through the entire opening movement to be able to judge upon Turk's first prerequisite, that the cadenza must weave together some of the important ideas of the piece. To save us the time, I can say that there is not much weaving going on at all, although Turk's second rule is satisfied, that the cadenza contains thoughts that are suited to the main character of the composition. Turk goes on to say that the cadenza should not be too long, especially in slow movements. Giuliani's written cadenza (as opposed to his performances) is not long at all; in fact it could be longer without upsetting the balance of the movement.

Rule 4 – there is not any real modulation taking place.

Rule 5 – it is a unified sentiment and variety is found in both rhythm and the introduction of lower auxiliaries.

Rule 6 – there is repetition – the opening arpeggio, for example – but not much.

Rule 7 – all the dissonances are properly resolved

Rule 8 – the cadenza must not be learnt. That is why the written cadenza must be treated as an example only. We could use some of it, should we wish, in our own attempt.

Rule 9 – ordered disorder: yes, that seems to be the case here.

Rule 10 – sketch a cadenza in advance.

So, Giuliani's cadenza seems to conform in most respects to Turk's rules, but deviates from them as well, but only slightly, as in the repetition of the opening arpeggio. Harmonically, all that is taking place over the four unbarred lines is a decoration of the movement from Dominant to Tonic.

In conclusion, to do justice to any composer's music we should at least be aware of how he played and how that influenced his compositional style. The role of improvisation or decoration is central to early 19th-century performance practice and must be studied in a stylistically appropriate way for each composer.

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ⁱ *Dionisio Aguado, New Guitar Method, An English translation of Aguado's celebrated method of 1843. Translated from the original Spanish by Louise Bigwood, with a preface by Brian Jeffrey* (Tecla 372). p.144.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pages 110-112.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 39.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 110.

^{vi} *The Guitar Works of Napoleon Coste* (Editions Chanterelle, Volume III, 1981. p 17)

^{vii} Quoted in New Grove, 'Cadenza'.

^{viii} Tecla 826. Mauro Giuliani *The Complete Works* Volume 26, p.5.