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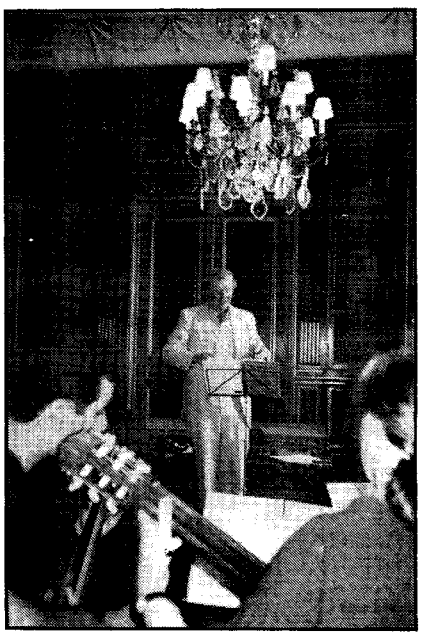

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INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL BARRUECO

By THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

I CAN still remember the excitement of discovering a Manuel Barrueco recording ten or so years ago. His playing was so distinctively different from any other player's. In terms of guitar history a lot has happened in the last ten years. But Barrueco was one of the first of a new breed of guitarists, with a voice that stood out admirably from the rest. Barrueco has not visited Britain so often in recent years but he will be coming to London next month to give a recital in the Wigmore Hall on 19 February. I spoke with him last year in London and was impressed by both his sense of humour and by the seriousness with which he considered each of my questions. He did mention though that I made him feel as if he were visiting an analyst.

TWS: *How long did you live in Cuba? Were you playing guitar when you were there?*

MB: I lived there for 14 almost 15 years. I started playing the guitar when I was eight. Now I can think of it with affection but I remember being able to play the Bach Chaconne when I was about 12. I don't know how well I could play it. I could get through it and that's about it. When I was about 17 I stopped playing for a while. Moving to the US put too much strain on me. I was very unhappy and at one point I just decided that I would not play any more. That lasted for about a year and a half or two years and then I started practising again.

Did anything inspire you to begin again?

Just that I was so unhappy. I went to an arts and music high school called Art High in northern New Jersey but I wasn't playing the guitar then, I was playing the french horn. Then I went to Peabody Conservatory and studied with Aaron Shearer. In my first year at the conservatory I probably practised on average about a half hour a week.

Are you teaching at Peabody now? Have you swapped from Manhattan?

Yeah, I'm teaching there now. I haven't officially left Manhattan yet. I think this year it actually becomes official but I became a part of the faculty at Peabody I think about two years ago. Then for one year I was doing both.

Is the Peabody Conservatory very different from the Manhattan School of Music?

It's quite different in every way for me. For one thing I went to school at Peabody, so it was a little strange at first to go back as a teacher. Also the facilities are different. Things as mundane as there being no parking in the streets of New York and all the garages that are full. That doesn't happen at Peabody and so it's easier for me to see the students. In New York, when I left my house I didn't know when I was going to make it to the school. Peabody has a beautiful concert hall, more than one. It also has a more relaxed atmosphere. Sometimes I felt that in New York there was too much going on for the students. You know, too often, too soon students would be walking around with stars in their eyes. Not that it doesn't happen there as well but it happens less. It's more realistic and in control.

Manuel Barrueco

Do you feel that your teaching style is changing because you're in a different atmosphere?

No, it's changing because *I'm* changing.

Are you at the stage of changing the direction of your repertoire?

A mid-life crisis?

No, not a mid-life crisis. Are you going through your blue period or your red period?

I hope it's expanding a little bit. It's more in my head now. I think you'll see it in February. The only thing that I can say about it is that I really would like to bring a fresh programme, to come here with things I haven't done before.

And for the rest of the year, what touring concerts do you have?

I have long tours in Germany and Austria. I have just been in Canada and also in Spain where I toured with the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra.

What concertos did you play?

The Concierto de Aranjuez by Rodrigo. That's the most popular one. I actually like that piece as well. I don't get tired of it, because I don't really hear anybody else do it. I like playing the Ponce concerto and the Giuliani also. I don't really like the long extended version that they have discovered. I think it's too long and too repetitive. Of new things I've only really played the Takemitsu concerto, *To the Edge of Dreams*. I played that in the US on a tour with the Boston Symphony with Ozawa and I've played it here as well with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in Glasgow.

"I like it to sound stylistically correct. That's something that's important to me. But it is a modern instrument and there will be a modern sound to it"

Did you get a good response?

Well, his music doesn't really try to please a crowd. He's a very solemn composer. There's a lot of poetry and beauty in his music but it's not something that will hit you over the head in any way, shape or form. So no, the audience doesn't go crazy over it. At best they may be seduced by it.

Do you play any other contemporary repertoire?

I've played all of Takemitsu's works for guitar. I've played *All in Twilight*. These are pieces I do in concert now. I'm also now playing the Britten *Nocturnal*. I've done some pieces by the composer Joan Tower, such as *Snow Dreams* for flute and guitar. I think it's a beautiful piece. I also love the music of Henze, and would like to play more of his music. I like contemporary music a lot, but not all of it. I'm not too fond of the type of music where one note embodies the whole meaning of the universe. I'm not into that, but anything that has poetry and beauty, like Henze and Takemitsu, I very much enjoy. I've been looking at a solo piece called *Nocturnal and Fantasie* by a young American composer called Allan Hirsh.

Then I've just performed Roberto Sierra's *Quintet for Guitar and String Quartet*, and this coming summer we're going to be premiering a double concerto for guitar, violin and orchestra by Sierra in Germany at the Schleswig-Holstein Fest. In a couple of years time we're doing another premiere by Takemitsu of another double concerto for violin, guitar and orchestra. The Sierra was commissioned through the Schleswig-Holstein Festival.

What do you think of Roberto Sierra's style?

I think his quintet is really effective. He has a lot of elements that are close to me, being from the Caribbean. But I think he also has a really solid technique that goes along with it. I mean he is a composer, he's not just somebody throwing notes on a piece of paper. So that's refreshing.

What about the guitar part? Does that feel refreshingly different? Does he explore things that you haven't come across before?

Instrumentally there are some things. I remember in one section that's really high on the fingerboard he has written grace notes that are in major 7ths and some with tremolos and he is trying to create the sounds of a tropical night. There's a little frog in Puerto Rico called a coqui, and the music imitates the sound of the coqui. It's a sound that I haven't really done before. There's no new attack or anything, but there are some things that are distinctly his own.

What about Takemitsu's writing for the guitar? Do you feel as though he's writing music onto the guitar or that he's really writing for the guitar?

My guess is that he is probably trying to do both. I think somebody like him would want to write music that would be of interest no matter where it's played. But I think on the other hand he would want to write something that would exploit the instrument. He obviously really likes to explore the colours of the instrument, very much so, and I think it's an integral part of composition anyway. Therefore in my eyes, he's come with a view of the instrument as far as colours are concerned that I really hadn't heard before. To me it's unique and he has changed my views of the colours of the instrument.

So he's actually created more...

I don't know if he has created anything. I think it's the way in which he uses them. When I started playing the guitar, the colours being used were the ponticello or tasto, and that was that. I revolted and I couldn't take it any more. I played all in one colour. With Takemitsu, he's very much into colours. For example, in his orchestrations he may have one line jumping around from different instruments just to get a different colour on a note. It's not an entirely new idea. But I think the way he does it is a very personal view of it and I think that's come to the guitar, or at least I try to maintain it when I play his music on the guitar. So there are more shades of the colour, it's not just dropped to ponticello or tasto, it's not that black-and-white style of playing.

So has that affected your interpretation of other works then and the colours that you use in playing other works?

Oh yes. In colours it has changed me without meaning

to. I have begun now to see colour more in the way that he sees it. Definitely with his music anyway.

From a practical point of view has that expanded your right hand technique?

Definitely. I can think of one chord that I was playing in *Folios,* where at the same moment you are playing two normal notes, another one with harmonics and yet another plucked with the left hand. To me that's his idea of colour and to me it would be an example of something that I never would have thought of before. In fact he doesn't ask for that fingering but it was a way that I found to make one of his chords playable. Sometimes his chords are not so playable on the instrument. Of course I played that for him, and he likes the sound.

In what specific way has it altered your interpretation of other repertoire? Can you think of another piece that you play where you would use those colours?

I think it's more subtle; for example, let's say you always play Bach and baroque pieces that are very metronomic. Then you begin to play more romantic pieces using lots of rubato. You make rubatos one measure long and one measure runs into the other. When you go back to Bach it's not that you're going to play it that way, but it will loosen you up a bit. You may still play in the tempo, but some of that romantic interpretation may come over. If I play Giuliani I'm not going to play a chord plucking the sixth string and playing the harmonic, but it might heighten my awareness of colour; it might just allow me to do something with colour that I might not have thought of before. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to do it in each style. This is all very academic and in the end it may come to nothing anyway, except to you when you're playing it. If you listen to the orchestration of composers it gives you an idea of their idea of colour and what it is that they want. It's great if you can play your baroque music differently from your classical and romantic music and know about the style, but it's even better if you can tell the difference between the composers of the same period. It's not easy.

You were doing some duets with David Russell some years ago. What happened to that?

Well, nothing. I love David both as a person and a guitarist. There is no guitarist I'd rather listen to than him. I think he's the most musical guitarist of our epoch, and he's one of the finest people I've ever met in the guitar. It was decided just to put off the duo playing for a while, but I certainly hope that we will do it again.

How do you approach programming? What really motivates you to practise a piece?

Oh,what motivates me to practice a piece? The fear of playing it badly.

How do you choose the programme?

I don't know. It depends. You know sometimes you hear or see a piece and you feel that you have to play it. Sometimes you feel it works within a programme. Occasionally you have to make decisions like that. I remember very early in my career, when I started to organise my programmes, that I would say: 'I'll play Suite so and so by so and so in D major, followed by the Sonata by so and so in D major, followed by the Fantasia in D major.' Then I realised I was only playing pieces in D major. Out of necessity I started learning pieces in other keys.

I go through changes. Sometimes it's an idea. Sometimes when I think of programmes that I have done in the past I now realise that I've done some pretty weird things. I was just looking through some programmes the other day and I found this programme that my teacher affectionately called the 'spaghetti programme' because it was jumping around between Giuliani and Paganini. It was Giuliani, Paganini, Giuliani, Paganani and Giuliani, you know.

"I just basically tried to play what was there"

Are you naturally attracted to Giuliani?

To Giuliani? No, not particularly, but for example, if you're talking about programming, there's my Sor and Mozart record. First of all I really hadn't heard what Mozart sounded like on the guitar, and he's a composer whose music I happen to love. I used to read his piano sonatas on the guitar just for my own enjoyment and to get to know them. I found one that I thought worked well and then I saw that Sor had written variations on a theme by Mozart. Also I found these airs that Sor had arranged from Mozart. So to me it became natural to put together an album that would have Mozart together with a guitar composer of the time. So not only would one get to know Mozart through the guitar but I was hoping that one would even get to know Sor a little bit better that way. The bridge was there for arranging Mozart.

With the Bach recording for example, I recorded a Partita a couple of years ago, at a time when I don't remember anybody else doing anything like that. Also on that record there is the music of Debussy, which is music that I love. If you look at the early arrangements of his music for guitar, it's hard to explain it, but in a way they were trying to make Bach out of him. That's not what he's about. I tried to find a way to recapture that flavour with the classical guitar. I don't know how that may sound now, but that's not anything that I had heard at the time.

Are you concerned about authenticity?

That's an interesting idea, because what I've realised is that if you take even the first chord of say the Bach Chaconne and play that on the guitar, you could be playing anything. You play that chord on an instrument like a baroque guitar and it sounds baroque. So the authenticity is only how far you want to go with it. The fact is I'm playing a modern instrument and there's a balance in there somewhere, but I think in the end I've decided at this stage of the game to do what I like about how I feel it, and let that be whatever it is. I like it to sound stylistically correct. That's something that's important to me. But it is a modern instrument and there will be a modern sound to it.

When your Bach record of the Lute Suites came out I remember being overwhelmed by it. It was very, very different from anything else that I had heard.

I wanted to do that. I always had the desire that if I played something I wanted to make it sound like you had never heard it before. It was something that you had heard all your life really. That in a way has been a challenge for me. Whenever I've done the traditional pieces, I wanted you to feel as though you had never heard them before.

A new approach to interpretation?

I wouldn't call it a new approach, I would call it a personal approach and if it happens to be a new approach then so be it. I'm not carrying any flags. I want to make it sound fresh. Mind you, that's become a lot more difficult to do now than before. There are a lot more players. The way that people play has become a lot more standardised. I remember when I started to play and give masterclasses through the US, people used to think that I had the weirdest right hand. Everyone had other ways of playing. Now that doesn't even exist any more.

What was different about your right hand?

Basically that it was a straight wrist. Everyone used to play like this or they had a specific way of interpreting things. That's gone now. It makes you realise how time goes by. My goal wasn't just to be different. I want to make that clear. I wanted to be fresh, personal but good and also not eccentric. Now at that time it was easy, because at that time there were basically only a couple of guitarists who had any influence and everybody would follow one or the other. Now people play in many different ways and it's no longer possible to see the influence of just one or two people.

In your personal view, have you been influenced by other musicians, be they guitarists or other musicians?

I think my personal view was very simple. I just basically tried to play what was there. I tried to learn it more from the point of view of a musician in general. So I think in many ways my way of doing things was very common, but not in the guitar. There is certain musical thought that is common among all instrumentalists, but somehow with the guitar we've managed to have different ideas of playing music. I just tried to be one of the crowd, but that somehow separated me from the guitar world.

Do you have a system that you follow in looking at a new piece?

No, no. For me at this point, you learn about something and then you let go and let it come out. At this point what I'm letting happen is basically to let it come out the way I feel it. There may have been some times before when maybe I didn't do something that I felt because maybe I didn't have enough confidence in my feelings about it. Now I will go ahead and take the chance and do it and let that be whatever it is.

Is that confidence a recent one, you feel?

I think it's been coming on slowly. I am a slow-changing person, things take time. I have to live with things. I realise that there are different ways to see yourself. How you compare with the ideas that you have as to the way something should be or you would like it to be. or if I'm playing a piece of music you can compare it to the way you hear it in your head. Or you can compare it with the way everybody else does it. I've never done much of that. That kind of comparison by seeing how other people do it. So it's always used with an idea of what I have in my head and it always falls short of what I would like it to sound. I'm always feeling that it's not good enough.

How old are you?

I'm 39 and I'm going through a couple of mid-life crises.

Do you feel as though you are entering another stage of your career or as though you are about to step on a higher artistic plane?

I hope so. I need challenges, you know. I hate to think that I'm in the same place that I was five years ago. Actually in many ways I feel great about it. I can tell you I'm enjoying it more than I ever have before. It's always been a bit of a struggle for me to do what I do. And now I have finally accepted it and I'm comfortable with it. I enjoy playing and I enjoy the lifestyle. Now I feel that it's time to go ahead and do something with it and I'm looking forward to that.

Are there any gaps in your professional work that you would like to fill?

Yes, actually, in orchestral recording. I'm really looking forward to doing just a couple of things that I want to do. Then I think I will be satisfied as far as having shown my work.

Discography

Manuel Barrueco plays Falla, Ponce, Rodrigo. Angel/EMI CDC 7492282 (1987)

Manuel Barrueco plays Mozart & Sor. Angel/EMI CDC 7493682 (1988)

Manuel Barrueco plays Brouwer, Villa-Lobos & Orbón. Angel/EMI CDC 7497102 (1989)

Manuel Barrueco plays Bach & De Visée. Angel/EMI(CDC 7499802 (1990)

Mozart: Duets for Flute and Guitar. Manuel Barrueco (guitar), Ransom Wilson (flute). Angel/EMI CDC 7541022 (1990)

Johann Strauss II, An Der Schönen Blauen Donau. The King's Singers, Manuel Barrueco (guitar). Angel/EMI CDC 7540572 (1990)

Manuel Barrueco: 300 Years of Guitar Masterpieces (3 CD set). VOX BOX 3 CD3X 3007 (1991)

Manuel Barrueco Plays Albéniz & Turina. Angel/EMI CDC 7543822 (1992)

THE SOLO GUITAR MUSIC OF JOAQUIN RODRIGO

by GRAHAM WADE

Part IV Bajando de la Meseta

IN 1954, at the age of forty-two, Joaquín Rodrigo's relationship with the guitar achieved new intensities, and from this year onwards the instrument seems to have gained a central role in his creative activities. For one thing *Fantasía para un Gentilhombre*, dedicated to Andrés Segovia, provided the repertoire with Rodrigo's second Guitar Concerto of distinction. It was however not premiered until March 1958, when Segovia presented the work at the War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, with Enrique Jordá conducting the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. The composer and his wife were present. Some weeks later Segovia recorded the work in New York, with the Orchestra of the Air, and it was issued in 1960 on 'Andres Segovia Golden Jubilee', Vol. 1 (DXJ 148, Brunswick AXTL 1088), coupled with the first recording of Manuel Ponce's *Concierto del Sur*. The critic of *The Gramophone* (July 1960) wrote the following comments:

In 1909 Segovia gave, in Granada, his first concert; in 1960 comes now Vol. I of the gramophone celebration of his Golden Jubilee. It is an outstanding production alike for the pleasure of the occasion, for the interest of the music, and for the superb quality of both playing and recording ...

... Joaquín Rodrigo's Fantasía is another combination, this time of the centuries. Rodrigo relies even more than Ponce on somebody else's tunes; in this case those of Gaspar Sanz ... Rodrigo has built a suite on the foundations of these tunes very much in the way that Peter Warlock built a suite on the tunes published by Arbeau; and this latter day Capriol makes an enchanting addition to the repertory. Not only does it benefit in sound from the tone colour of the guitar – as nearly all dance music surely must – but also from the brilliance and clarity of Rodrigo's orchestral woodwind writing ...

The first Spanish performance of the *Fantasía* was at the VII Festival Internacional de Música y Danz de Granada on 20 June 1958, with Segovia, Jordá, and the Spanish National Orchestra.

Bajando de la Meseta was also completed in 1954. Its dedicatee, Nicolas Alfonso (b.1918, Santander, Spain), became Professor of Guitar at the Brussels Conservatoire. He formed a guitar duo with his wife Ilse, and toured widely. Composers who dedicated works to him included not only Rodrigo, but also Torroba, and Absiol (whose *Contrastes* was dedicated to the Alfonso Duo). Alfonso was a prolific editor of guitar works and his edition of *Bajando de la Meseta* was published by Schott Freres, Brussels, in 1963. A further edition, revised and fingered by Pepe Romero, was published by Joaquín Rodrigo Ediciones in 1991.

Bajando de la Meseta (Coming down from the Meseta) makes up the cycle *Por los campos de España*, along with *En los Trigales* and *Entre Olivares*. Rodrigo's own liner notes on Pepe Romero's recording of the work set the scene as follows:

The plateau (meseta) referred to is the one that forms the region of Castilla la Nueva; coming down from this plateau we reach Andalucia and in this imaginary and musical journey we are suddenly confronted with loud singing that echoes out to the wide horizon and then changes into a quick trembling dance. It is the real bewitching Andalucia, with its pulsating rhythms, which rewards the traveller after a long journey.

Bajando de la Meseta has not proved especially popular, despite recordings by Nicolas Alfonso (Vega C30 S-121) and Pepe Romero (*Joaquín Rodrigo*, Philips 9500 915, issued 1981), as well as a superb recording by the Spanish guitarist Esteban Bottinelli (*Joaquín Rodrigo, Obras para Guitarra*, Etnos 04 - A - XXIS, issued 1985). It seems a pity that in an era when guitarists are seeking more unfamiliar repertoire that this composition seems to have been played only by very few performers. For *Bajando de la Meseta*, though not one of Rodrigo's assured and central masterpieces for the guitar, is in itself a most interesting composition.

For one thing it has many fascinating similarities with *Fandango* of *Tres piezas españolas*, with its 'wrong note' chords, its use of triplets, and its catchy melody. Moreover its unusual choice of the key of B major, and its modulation through various keys, reveals Rodrigo's inventive and experimental attitude to the guitar and his desire to create statements of substance through the solo instrument. Moreover it does lend itself to a certain flexibility of interpretation, as well as indulging in some exciting passages of a vividly Iberian nature.

Thus the composition begins with a meditative *lento* section in the unusual key (for the guitar) of B major. The writing is sparse and somewhat repetitive, the bare textures of this section relieved only by a burst of four bars of arpeggios before a return to the original theme. The last four bars of this introduction modulate to G major by way of some remarkable 'wrong note' chords (conventional chords rendered discordant by the introduction of one or more alien notes) in which Rodrigo frequently delights.

An *Allegro*, the 'quick trembling dance', follows, *Tempo de Seguidilla*, again with Rodrigo's 'wrong note' chords predominant. Strummed chords (*rasgueado*) of G major with an added augmented fourth (C#), lead on to other discords. The strummed section ends with a pleasing melodic theme, before the strummed chords return. Bottinelli slows down the tempo for the melodic sections in contrast to the vigorous strumming. Though not marked on the score it seems an effective interpretation. This section ends with a transition into E major and a development section made up of (a) rhythmic broken chordal figurations played not strummed and (b) single note triplets evolving through chords (in triplet rhythms) back to the *Seguidilla* in a brief *rasgueado* section imitative of the earlier passage. A fairly lengthy coda in the original key of B major follows, deploying short and snappy, flamenco-like scale passages as well as a number of rhythmic flourishes involving both the earlier melodic theme and vigorous triplets.

Rodrigo uses almost the whole range of the guitar in this piece, as well as many different textures which he will employ elsewhere in later guitar music. The opening *lento* recalls the first short *cadenza* of the *Aranjuez* Concerto with its single line melodic fragments contrasted against bare chords. The *rasgueado* passages of the *Tempo de Seguidilla* are reminiscent of his use of rhythmic chords in both *Fandango* and *Pequeña Sevillana* (*Tres pequeñas piezas*, 1963). The swooping triplets of the middle E major section evoke shades of *Zapateado* and even *Elogio de la Guitarra* (1971).

Thus *Bajando de la Meseta* is an important link between the early efforts of Rodrigo to write expressively for the guitar and what follows. As a unit in the cycle of *Por los campos de España*, the work obviously has a supreme importance, though it is very rare that all three pieces in the group are performed as a group. Undoubtedly the appearance of *Tres piezas españolas*, dedicated to Segovia in the same year, has left *Bajando de la Meseta* well and truly overshadowed.

Bajando de la Meseta is clearly a lesser work than the great triptych of *Tres piezas españolas*, one of the most remarkable monuments to the guitar's virtuosity achieved this century. Yet, assuming that *Bajando de la Meseta* was composed either shortly before or about the same time as *Tres piezas españolas*, there is certainly internal evidence that the writing of the lesser work may well have contributed to the success of the greater. The two works remain distinctly related in terms of chronology, technical aspects, and the integral use of the traditional Spanish dance forms.

1954 saw the completion of *Ave María*, an arrangement for mixed choir, *Canción primaveral* for soprano, chorus and orchestra, *La destrucción de Sagunto*, music for the stage (premiered at Teatro Romano, Sagunto, June 8, 1954), and the three act ballet, *Pavana Real*, (with the story by Victoria Kamhi, 'inspired by the life and music of Luis de Milán, vihuelist and nobleman'). With *Bajando de la Meseta, Fantasía para un Gentilhombre* and *Tres piezas españolas* also completed at this time, it can be seen that 1954 was indeed a remarkable year for Joaquín Rodrigo.

Next time we will take a look at *Tres piezas españolas*.

JOHN MARLOW (1939-1992)

John Marlow, who died on 31 August 1992, was one of the first and most important guitar educators in the United States. He began his studies with Sophocles Papas around 1959. He later studied with Andrés Segovia in several masterclasses in the US and Europe and was a firmly committed Segovia disciple. In 1964 he began teaching at the American University in Washington DC. This guitar programme was begun by Sophocles Papas and was the first college-level programme in the US. Over the years John Marlow had a number of students who themselves have gone on to teach at colleges and universities.

In recent years John Marlow became increasingly interested in performing and arranging chamber music with guitar, the most notable group he was associated with being the Washington Guitar Quintet. (The other members are Myrna Sislen, Charlie Byrd, Jeffery Meyerriecks and Larry Snitzler — all former students of Sophocles Papas.) He toured the US with this group as well as performing in several recordings. He was very prolific as an arranger, with 250 trios, 68 quartets, 20 quintets (for the Washington Guitar Quintet), 200 songs (voice and guitar) and 50 solo arrangements to his credit. John Marlow also had a number of original compositions performed by, amongst others, the Washington Guitar Quintet. He is survived by his wife Carole, his son Richard, other family members and many friends.

Lawrence Johnson

MUSIC SUPPLEMENT

EDITED BY NEIL SMITH

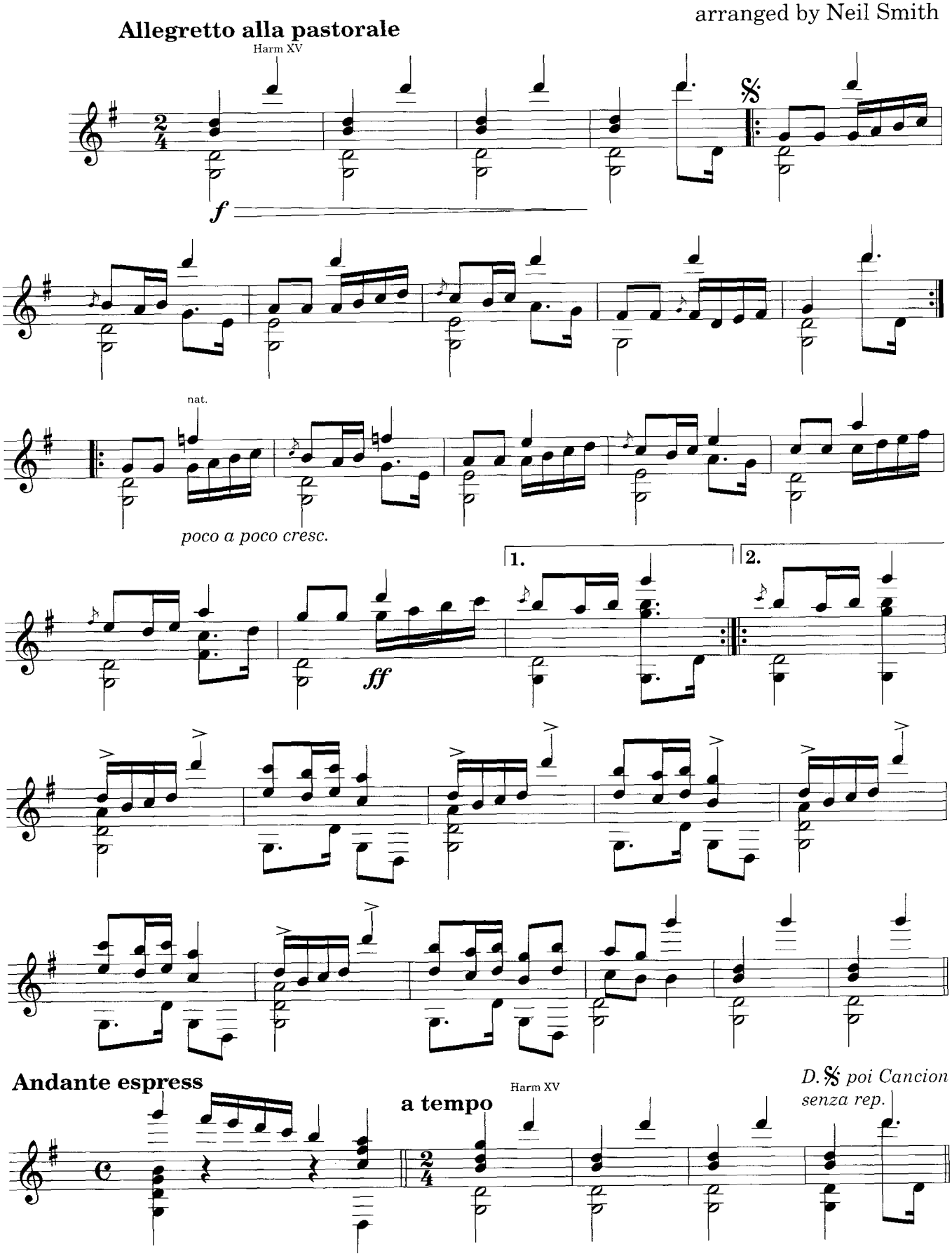
DANZA ESPANOLA No. 4 (Villanesca)
by Enrique Granados, arranged by Neil Smith
This piece is from the famous set of 12 Dances and bears a dedication a T. Tasso. The word 'estribillo' in the central sector refers to a choral-style piece normally found at the beginning or end of a Villancico. Here feel free to edit any of the difficult voice parts and include these later after practice. I allowed the melody to fall one octave lower than most guitar settings near the close of the Cancion since this does sound effective on my guitar, again, feel able to adjust this if necessary.

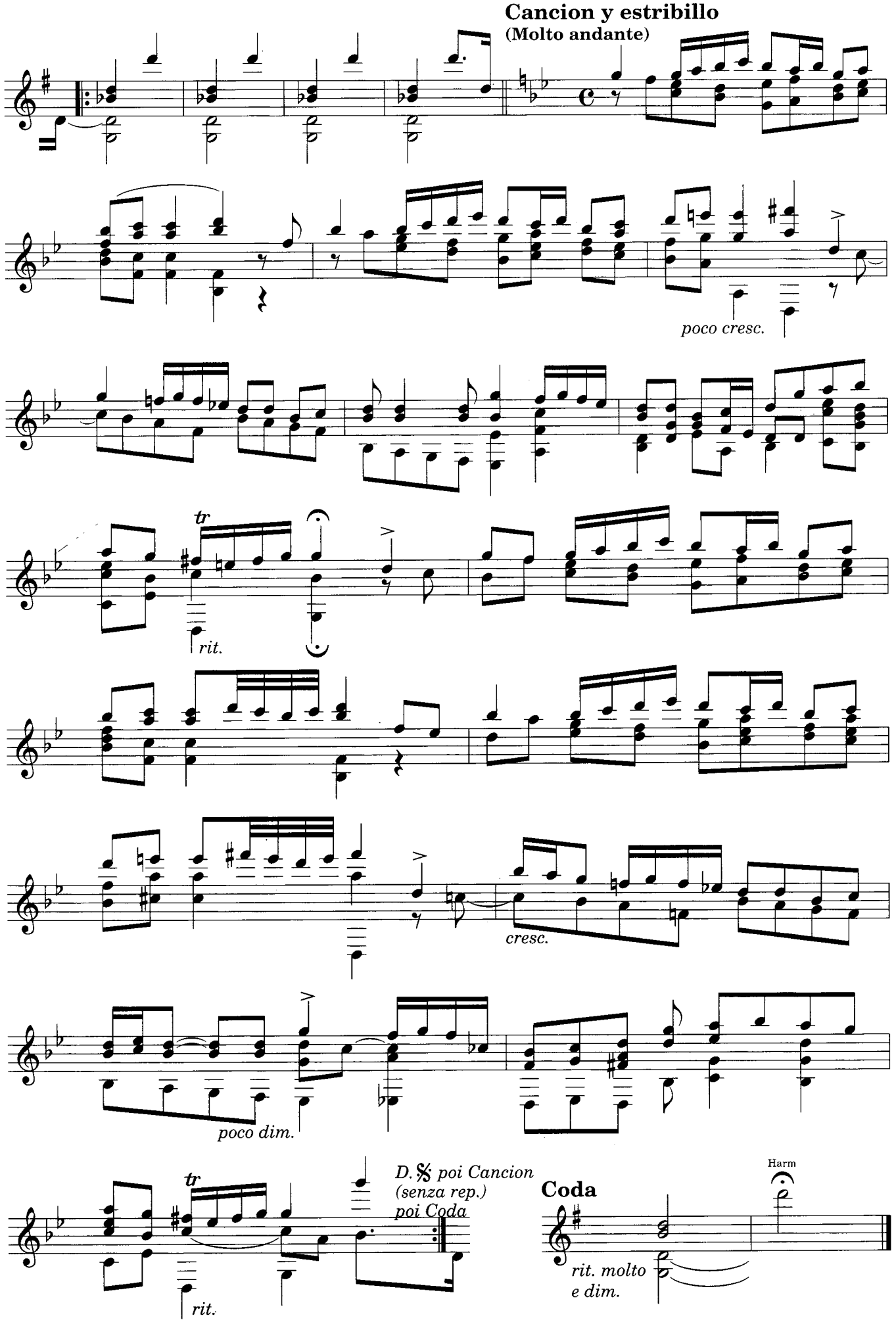
LULLABY by Michael Clayton
This work for the less advanced player makes use of barrés and harmonics. The barré blocks up to 5 strings in this piece, the diamond-shaped notes are the harmonics over the written fret, strings are given in a circle.

Danza Espanola IV

(Villanesca) a T. Tasso

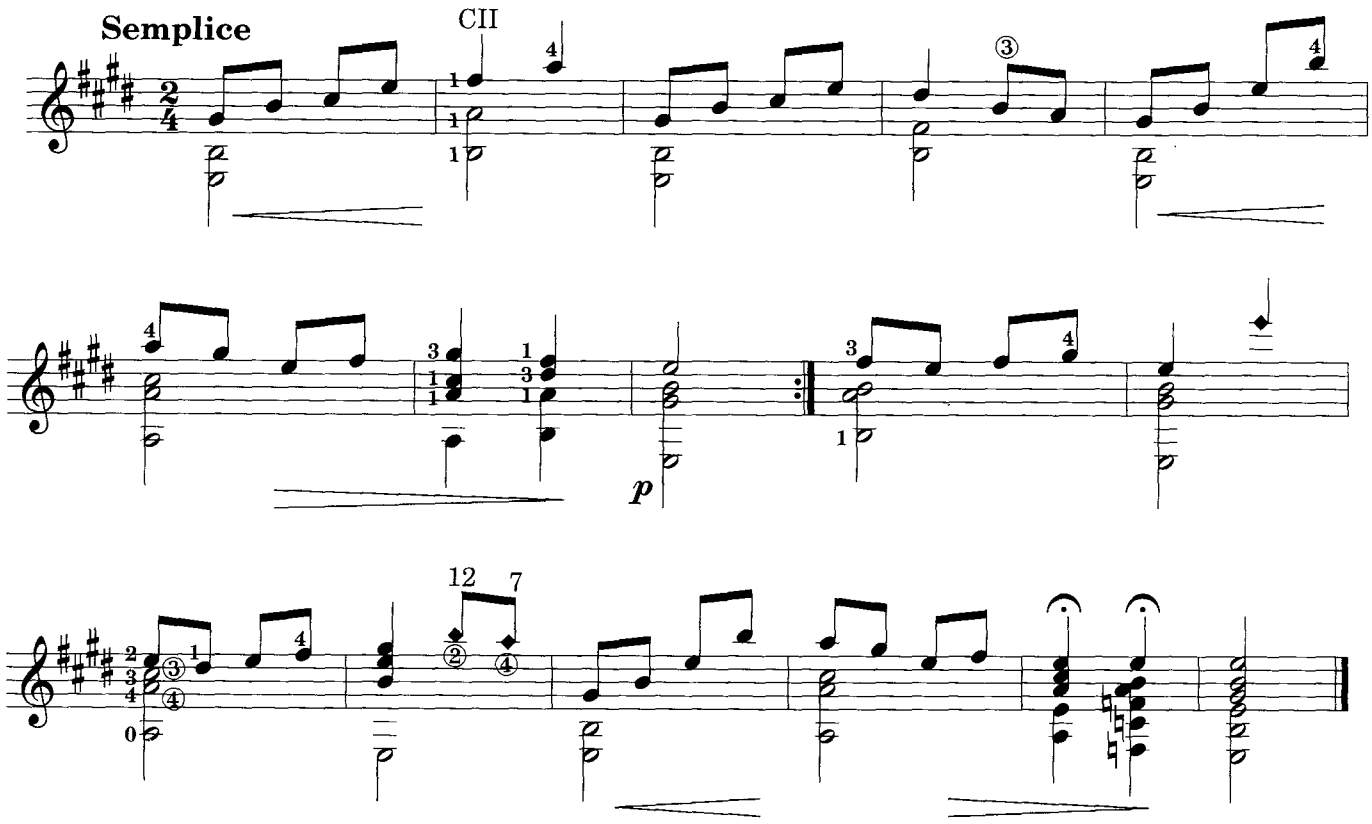
E. Granados
arranged by Neil Smith




Cancion y estribillo
(Molto andante)
poco cresc.
tr
rit.
cresc.
poco dim.
tr
D.𝄋 poi Cancion
(senza rep.)
poi Coda
rit.
Coda
Harm
rit. molto
e dim.

LULLABY

M. Clayton



IN SEARCH OF QUALITY

By STEPHEN KENYON

THIS started out as a letter in reply to Lawrence Johnson's article – 'On Sor's Quality (and other thoughts)' in CG September 1992. However, it has grown, under the stimulation of the accumulated dissatisfaction with the debate on the value of the guitar's nineteenth century repertoire, which has built up in my mind since it began.

Since the protagonists of the C19 'Golden Age', notably Mr Johnson and David McConnell, have been awarded a good many column inches in recent times, please understand if not every detail of the question is aired in this short piece. Perhaps there is something in the chemistry of missionary zeal that confers a prolificness of output and a willingness to repeat things that is not shared by those inclined to dissent. This is part of the problem, as an unhealthy situation has grown up in which a great deal is produced by these gentlemen, either to be sniped at with undignified insults, (as in the Letters CG Sept 92), or ignored as the academically flawed outpourings of excessively subjective and self-important minds.

Neither of these results is in anybody's interest, least of all the guitar's. Much that Messrs L. J. and D. Mc, have written has helped me, at least, to re-examine attitudes and confront assumptions. My pursuit of C19 repertoire predates the development of the present discussion and my musical understanding led me to my own conclusions, which are not fixed but open to new information.

The problem lies in the combative, evangelical and authoritarian manner often adopted. No one can express an honest limited estimation of our Romantic repertoire without incurring instant wrath, humiliation and accusations of prejudice or bad intent. This might be a tolerable issue of democratic strength of feeling were it not for the fact that this campaign of correction is carried out by just two people.

To be fair, a distinction should be made, between Mr Johnson, who concentrates his studies on Sor and is inclined, as in his most recent article, to offer a balanced view intended to redress historical habits of thought, without dogmatically inflating any C19 reputations; and Mr McConnell, whose tastes are inclined to equate 'Mozart, early Beethoven and Carulli/Giuliani' (CG Sept 92) whilst also not caring 'for Mozart, early Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann or Brahms' (Guitar International Jan 88). In another letter (GI March 88) he described his 'complete break with CG . . . I urge all those who prize freedom of speech and fair treatment to do the same'. In August 1992 he contributed the article 'Matteo Carcassi' to CG.

I would now like to refer to Mr Johnson's article, as further issues will arise in due course. This writer is to be congratulated insofar as he avoids the megaphone approach to the dissemination of opinions. Despite the academic tone of voice and the thoughtful presentation of some background history, there are some points at which his argument is at fault.

Sor's Harmonic Language

Discussing Sor's harmonic language under 'Other large scale works' (in which he bothers to mention but three examples, the third apparently in an aside), Mr Johnson asserts that 'progressive harmony' would have been detrimental to the high quality music Sor wanted to compose. The context is the admission that 'Sor's use of harmony and modulation often seems unadventurous and nostalgic of Haydn or Mozart' (p. 35) tempered with the observation that his use of form was more contemporary (as already pointed out GI 8/87), and more specifically: how would a guitar composer compensate for the instrument's lack of 'tumultuous and dramatic grand effects'? (p. 36).

Now, words can be strangely ambiguous things, but I take from this that Sor could not write harmonically involved music (as non guitarists were starting to do) because that would have made it worse music. This does not make sense, if so. Sor was perfectly aware that the leading composers of his day were starting to inject a greater degree of harmonic drama into their music than had been the taste in his formative years. A second possibility is that we are to understand that 'high quality' was to equate with idiomatic practicality. Sor wanted to sell sheet music and so might think twice about writing music that imposed upon amateur techniques the problems of reading and playing in keys replete with many flats and sharps. Complex harmonic resolutions are also difficult as they require chord shapes far removed from the familiar triadic arrangements that the tuning was developed to facilitate. Regondi is the only composer to really succeed in this direction! A third possibility is that the guitar mitigates against remote keys and complex chords in absolute terms, i.e. that they sound bad. Well, some keys are more in tune than others, but enough 'key-cycle' works have been written to disallow this.

There is quite enough mainstream music of the time in a progressive idiom that is not full of the tumultuous effects to have given Sor the chance to stay within the fashion without resorting to ugly gestures had he so chosen. More to the point, we should realise that simply being 'behind the times' is not in itself a guarantee of low quality. (The examples of Bach and several C20 figures spring to mind). Whatever the reasons for their personal style, composers must be judged on the content of their output first.

I would like to suggest that the 'detrimental to high quality' theory underestimates Sor's technique as a composer. My observation is that his use of the fingerboard proved that the guitar was capable of utilising all the resources of modulation, textural variety and thematic development that are generally found in music of high quality. It is noticeable that he makes use of far fewer overtly idiomatic 'tricks' than, say, Giuliani. His music is texturally denser, more 'pianistic', often sustaining three voices. Texture as a technical problem has always challenged players of fretted instruments, largely because, whether lutenists or guitarists, they found themselves in a musical climate dominated by the influence of keyboard instruments. Upon these it is not difficult to supply as many voices as the ear can comfortably handle.

An obvious solution for composers finding themselves artistically limited by one guitar's fingerboard would be the use of two (or more!) guitars. But Sor's duets are not so much more variegated in their use of musical

resources that there is much reason to believe his inspiration was greatly liberated in this medium.

Mr Johnson cites Sor's Op. 59, (Fantaisie Elégiaque) as Sor's 'most progressive (implied harmonically) piece' (my brackets). Well, this piece stays close to the home key of E minor, modulating to G and E major, with plentiful chromatic harmony, often relying on descending diminished chords. Most notable are the passages centred on F and C which decorate and delay the arrival of the otherwise entirely expected new keys, and the use of counterpoint, including a cadence (Marche, b.31) straight out of Dowland. This is intelligent compositional technique because all these features are in line with the composer's 'elegiac' intentions.

However, we need to consider why modulation and chromaticism became an increasing feature of C19 music. As musical designs became longer, it became necessary to travel a greater distance from the home key, in order to maintain a sense of drama, which is particularly important of course in sonata form. If you are writing a short piece you cannot afford to run through too many keys too fast or your listener will not be able to feel comfortable about where the key centre is. Conversely, if you are writing a long piece, you must move away from home base or your listener will become satiated with the same tonality. The longer the piece, the more variety will, in general, be needed. At some 15 minutes in length, this is the only problem with Sor's Op. 59 – the gravity of all those E's proves irresistible! So many guitar pieces are short that we cannot complain if they do not exhibit high degrees of harmonic adventure. The same applies to much music for piano etc. Unfortunately many of the works for guitar are in variation form which, by its nature, tends to impose a sameness in harmonic design, often only allowing movement to relative and tonic majors and minors. In the case of Sor's Op. 59 at least, we have nothing to be ashamed of – quite the reverse – but as the composer's most progressive piece, for one written towards the end of his life (he died in 1839) it does show us exactly where he stood!

To return to Mr Johnson's article, on p. 36 we read that in 'the written advertisement to perhaps his most "progressive" work, the Fantasia Op. 59 . . . he mentions that he would have written many other works in this progressive manner, had he had the advantages that Aguado's invention gave the guitar'. There are two problems here. The first is that the title of this introduction to Op. 59 is 'Avertissement' which means 'Warning', not Advertisement. The second is that nowhere does Sor make any such statement. This text is fascinating for the insight it gives into Sor's state of mind, and the degree to which he felt himself above the rest of the guitar community. A translation is appended.* Most notable are his jibes at Giuliani concerning the left-hand thumb and operatic arrangements. It is also remarkable how many very contemporary sounding statements he makes! It is however a shame that Mr Johnson has not read it properly before deducing important conclusions about Sor's artistic mind.

So the question remains as to why Sor chose to write for guitar in a rather old-fashioned harmonic style most if not all the time. Quite honestly we can never know, but it is probably a mixture of all the possibilities you can think of, the favourite surely being that this was how he liked it! In the final analysis it does not matter. Sor probably was not writing for posterity, for people to argue over 160 years later. But when we come to assess his work in the big scheme of things, the 'why' is only of secondary importance to what he achieved for his instrument. The next question is how to play it all.

Performance Tradition

This issue, it seems, Mr Johnson would like to build into a big screen behind which Sor's reputation can hide until we learn how to interpret him 'properly'. A tradition of interpretation can be of great importance. It can clarify many small details of articulation, it can give authority to the balancing of movements across a whole work, and everything in between. In other words it can supply information about all those aspects of the interpretation of a composer which simply cannot be written down on the score.

As such it is effectively synonymous with those elements of musicianship called interpretation which must be brought into play no matter what the style or 'tradition'. These are the things which make the difference between a reproduction of the notes and a musical performance. As such Mr Johnson is entirely correct to raise the subject, and it is a common observation that it is often in C19 music that guitar players of most standards fail to do more than 'play the notes'.

However, heartening as it must be to enjoy a 'direct lineage', I am sure few people would be naive enough to suppose that after four generations of transmission the message had not been rather coloured by the individuals along the way. We all know the party game of sending a message around a group of people; then think what a 'message' is Beethoven's Op. 106! Could it be that the stunning result of the traditions quoted is something to do with the fact that it is a lineage of musical genius?

Sor was never such an island unto himself that his music drew nothing from that of his many instrumental peers. The most useful thing that guitarists can do, then, is to broaden their education to include teachers of instruments whose strongest repertoire is that of the classical and romantic eras. Today many still fail to benefit from such teaching, especially when, like Mr Johnson, they have not been lucky enough to attend a conservatoire – and even then. Such teaching at least gives a basis for performance drawn from a common stylistic pool. We do not have to wait for decades for a 'Sor-specific' tradition to emerge from the little world of the guitar.

Analysis

Unfortunately, nothing that we can regret in the lack of tradition and original manuscripts can change the notes written on the page. To assert that 'one cannot judge music without having heard it in authoritative performances' (p. 38) would be taken as rather an insult by the many musicians around the world who can, and do, judge the compositional standard of music by hearing it in their head. The questionable markings and tempo indications mentioned (p. 38) may seem to be terribly important, but they do not make an earth-shattering difference to structure, melody, variation technique, harmony and so on.

It is perfectly possible to see on the page the unfolding beauties of melody, the perfectly contrived development of interwoven themes, the harmonic processes functioning to subtly shift the background, to

raise or lower the emotional temperature according to an inspired understanding of the structural relationship between climaxes. Or to see their absence. There are even guitar players now who can take you bar by bar through Beethoven's 32 sonatas and lay out for inspection the amazing complexities, beautiful simplicities, the hand of genius as manifested in the manipulation of musical material. This is called analysis. It is what the great players cited by Mr Johnson do, consciously or unconsciously (as well as remembering their pedigree).

It is also what a great many students and professional players do all the time. The problem is that by admitting his own level – 'I could never have appreciated Beethoven's late piano sonatas without having heard the marvellous recordings of Artur Schnabel' – he gives the reader little reason to believe he is aware of his own limitations, and hence little reason to believe his subjective responses to music are worth printing, let alone at such length and on so many occasions.

There is no doubt that the guitar has been grievously ill-served by unrepresentative or unsympathetic editions and selections of C19 music, and playing habits that say rather more about performer than music. Much of this still persists. There is no doubt that the enrichment of understanding of this music will enrich our programmes and recordings. But until those inclined to devote their lives to the 'Golden Age' can persuade their readership that they possess adequate authority, few will believe their message. There is only so much that one can take of 'I think xyz is a genius', or 'I see great truths in these endless arpeggios', 'I think, I think, I think', repeated time and time again in letters and now articles. We have seen too many ponderous essays of patchy scholarship, amateurish in appearance with giant photographs, replete with unsubstantiated assertions and devoid of reliable references. All this from just two self-appointed crusaders who have taken up much valuable space with their missionary zeal in the only English language monthly journal available.

Too often the question of 'comparison' between Sor (and his co-instrumentalists) and the familiar big names has been one of knee-jerk reactions and unconscious assumptions (on all sides of the great divide). To my mind the problem is that people tend to compare the Jupiter Symphony, perhaps, with the Mozart variations. Or William Tell with a Rossiniana. You must deal in like vs like. But then you must pile all the giant achievements of your 'big name' onto one side of the scales, and the giant achievements of your 'little name' on the other.

It is now getting rather late to continue to promote the argument that too many judgements are based on knowledge of a tiny fraction of the repertoire. Over the last 15 years many of us have purchased and made themselves familiar with the various 'complete works' now available in facsimile. The result has sadly not been one of 'more and better', but 'more and the same'.

There have also been several recordings and broadcasts devoted to C19 composers, by highly respected artists, who clearly have done their background (sight) reading. I hope nobody is going to make us play, memorise, perfect, concertise, and subject to Schenkerian analysis every last note of each 'complete works' before we can say what we think.

The last frontier, so to speak, must be to look at music by C19 guitarists that occupies the same instrumental realm as that by other composers. Carulli wrote much chamber music and concertos, analysis of whose instrumental writing and musical integrity would lead to fair balancing of the scales. The same goes for Giuliani. However, it is to Sor that we must look for music that does not involve the guitar, where the various potential restraints upon the composer's imagination vanish. It would be a great service for his extant string quartets, piano and orchestral music to be made available for analysis and possible performance. There is enough good music by very obscure composers to be found on the airwaves to give Sor a decent chance and then we should all be able to listen to the quality of the music without our guitar emotions getting in the way. But would we?

*(Translated by Regine Maligne). Translator's note: the translation is mainly as literal as possible but has in some places had to be slightly less word for word in the interests of intelligibility. Source: Sor F – Fantasia Elégiaca Op. 59 ed. Chiesa Zerboni (Avertissement is a facsimile).

Warning

I would never have dared to impose on the guitar such a tough task as to render the effects demanded by this piece without the excellent invention of my friend D. Aguado. This device which in holding the guitar at the height and position convenient for the player adds to the playing the effort otherwise used to hold up the neck with the left hand and to press the body of the instrument with the right arm to give it steadiness. Being only occupied with the fingering and the production of sound, I can place the left hand in the manner to best find under my fingers what I would be obliged to search out all the time if I held it in the usual guitarist's manner, otherwise if I wanted to hold it as you have to I would risk the neck changing angle during shifts when it is temporarily unsupported, my fingers no longer finding the string at the place intended.

I understand perfectly that most guitarists do not share my opinion about the invention of my friend; this is very simple; the making of their music only requires half the length of their fingers in front of the neck, the rest being behind to hold the neck, allowing the thumb to make bass notes which if done with the index or middle fingers would make their playing look so easy that it would not produce the effect they intend. It is true that this music is the cause of the guitar's present discredit in the true musical world and that 'Guitarist' is synonymous with the 'last resort'. But is it the nature of the instrument which discredits the artist or the guitarist which degrades the instrument? . . . Aguado's invention will resolve this question. The guitar can now be raised to the level where it belongs due to its aptitude for harmony almost as much as the harp, and for melody even more. One who would have already a little talent could not be forgiven if he did not contribute to the extending of the boundaries in which ignorance and habit have imprisoned this powerful instrument. Without my friend's invention I could never have imagined the guitar to be capable of rendering, without great difficulty, at the same time the different qualities of tone, the singing treble, the bass and harmonic support which are required by a piece of the character of this one, because everything is in the domain of the instrument. If one tries to play this piece without this help (the tripod – RM), i.e. while holding it in the neck in the manner of certain guitarists, you will see that it is impossible to play (in this manner) anything other than of the mandoline an octave lower with a bass note

here and there; that is to say poor music; in vain some guitarists will accumulate difficulties to dazzle the vulgar by getting hold of a beautiful and successful piece of orchestral music such as 'Guillaume Tell', 'Semiramis' etc, the need to strip out the harmony in the moments where it is most indispensable, and even to mutilate the skeleton so it does not go beyond the reach of their fingers, which are shortened and misplaced because of the stupid use of the thumb for the notes on the sixth string, will make pitiable and tawdry the most delicious music. This however is what they call Arranging.

Stephen Kenyon
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