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Fernando Sor and the Panormos: an overview of the development of the guitar in the 19th century

Introduction Between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, the guitar experienced a sudden development from marginality to great fortune and finally to decadence all within a few decades. As a result lutherie followed a similar course and the guitar itself changed in many ways during these years. The number of strings, as well as the shape, design and playability of the instrument evolved in parallel with the process of looking for a sound identity which it did not find in a univocal way until the birth of the guitar of Antonio de Torres in the second half of the 19th century.

Reasons for this transformation can be found in the changing of musical aesthetics, in the evolution of performing practice and in the changing relationship between the player and his public. Mauro Giuliani and Fernando Sor are the most representative guitarists of the 19th century. Their names are associated with the two main compositional currents of their time: the first is related to the Italian school in Vienna; the second to the Spanish school which developed in Paris. Thus lutherie straddled classicism and romanticism following these two different trends. In this context the collaboration between player and luthier had an important impact on the future development of the instrument. The relationship between Sor and Panormo is one of the first examples of this new period.

An age of transition The end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century is an age of great transition for the guitar. The instrument transformed from the little five-stringed baroque instrument to the modern six-stringed one. Understanding this evolution is helpful for many reasons. First of all for musicians and musicologists who need to interpret the composers' intentions, recognize the aesthetic changes in the music of this period and understand how the taste of the audience developed. But also when luthiers and owners of historical instruments restore an instrument, they need to know how these changes occurred in order to decide what can be destroyed and what is to be preserved in terms of previously executed repairs or customizing.

Two very evident changes appear in guitar construction of this period. The main change was in the stringing of the instrument. We know that in Spain the addition of the sixth course took place before the obsolescence of the double string. This can be seen in the guitars made by José Benedit and Juan Pages in Cadiz, by Lorenzo Alonso and

Manuel Muñoa in Madrid, by José Martínez in Malaga, and others.¹ In Italy, and then in the rest of Europe, the single string was introduced before the use of the added bass. Using single strings rather than double strings, leaves some pegs ready for an extra bass. In any case, we know of a guitar by Giovan Battista Fabbricatore (Naples) built in 1794² for six single strings.³

At the same time, there are also some evident changes in guitar design: over a few years most of the rich decorations that were typical of the baroque guitars of Tielke, Voboam, Matteo and Giorgio Sellas, and others disappeared, leaving the instrument simple and unadorned.⁴ The back was now made of two nearly flat book-matched pieces of wood with no inlays. No more parchment rose in the sound hole, no more ivory-tortoise inlays on the body, and later, no moustache shaped decorations at the sides of the bridge. This is partly because the idea of beauty itself was changing, but also because the luthier's purpose was to build a good musical instrument, not only a craftsman's masterpiece.⁵

Playability also became important in this period. In fact the development of technology in string manufacturing allowed musicians to have better quality basses on an appreciably shorter scale (this was another reason why it was possible to add the sixth string in the bass range).⁶ Moreover the player could now rely on higher-tension strings, which could be plucked more strongly and, with the added use of nails, produced a louder sound (on lower-tension strings the use of nails produces an unpleasant and harsh sound).

For these reasons the fingerboard evolved after 1820 into a piece of hardwood glued on top of the neck. The soundboard (see illustration 5 and 6) increased the stiffness of the whole instrument, making it easier for the luthier to create a good set-up of playing

- 1 Bruno Marlat: *Fernando Sor et la lutherie de guitare de son temps: une étude organologique*, and Eusebio Rioja: *Datos sobre los guitarreros malagueños apreciados por Sor*, in: *Estudios sobre Fernando Sor*, ed. by Luis Gásser, Madrid 2003, p. 531–552 and 553–566.
- 2 In: Giovanni Accornero: *Rosa sonora*, Savigliano 2003, p. 57; see the illustration on p. 56.
- 3 1792 is marked by James Westbrook as the date of the first 6-string guitar of which there can be no doubt in: *The Century That Shaped The Guitar*, [Hove, East Sussex] 2005, p. 42.
- 4 See for example the illustrations of a chitarra battente made by Magno Stregher in Venice in 1621, its table inlaid with ivory, ebony and mother-of-pearl (in: N. Freeth and C. Alexander: *The Acoustic Guitar*, Godalming 1999, p. 19); or the back of a five-course guitar made by René Voboam in Paris in 1641 in tortoiseshell, with ebony and ivory inlays (p. 21); and a six-course guitar by José Pagés of Cadiz, made in 1813 (p. 35). More illustrations in: Harvey Turnbull: *The Guitar from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, London 1974.
- 5 All photographs are by the author.
- 6 Mimmo Peruffo: *Le corde per chitarra tra il Settecento e l'avvento del nylon*, part 2, in: *Il Fronimo* 30 (2002), p. 60.

action and for the player to reach the higher positions with the left hand. This in turn allowed more playing room for the fingers of the right hand. Furthermore metal frets and machine-heads solved many tuning and intonation problems (see illustration 4, 7 and 8).

The background for the development There are two main reasons behind these developments. The first is the end of baroque aesthetics. The richness of harmonics due to the simultaneous vibration of the double strings creates a reverberating effect: this is effective for polyphony, but absolutely detrimental when striving for clarity in a melodic line. In the Renaissance this had already affected the first string of the lute, but in the 19th century the melodic use began to involve all the notes on the fingerboard of the guitar. Better quality of gut strings on the market also encouraged the use of single instead of double strings.⁷ This also helped solve a series of tuning problems.⁸

The second reason is the need for technological improvement. In order to explain this however some introductory remarks are required. The great popularity of the guitar in this period produced a chain of effects. The travelling virtuoso guitarists visiting the greatest capitals in Europe met and shared information about playing technique and compared the quality of their instruments. This brought about a better understanding of what could be improved. The guitar became a fashionable instrument in the parlours of middle-class people and that in turn affected guitar makers and their market. They now needed to produce instruments in greater quantities and some of them soon established factories that supplied the big music shops in London, Paris, Vienna, Naples and other European centres. At the same time productive settlements were created involving whole cities (Mirecourt in France, Markneukirchen in Germany). Often these instruments left the factory without the maker's label to be sold with each shop's own label. The luthier, determined to keep his high-quality low-number production of guitars, was forced to offer technologically improved instruments in order to stay in the business.

Musical performances and how they were conceived can be seen as another important factor of development. In the past, recitals were mostly organized by members of the aristocracy as a form of home entertainment. Now, following the French Revolu-

7 Peruffo: *Le corde per chitarra*, p. 50–61.

8 Tuning problems for lutes and other double-stringed instruments were really remarkable, so that we read as follows: »Now Herr Mattheson hits the nail on the head when he writes: »We pay twice for the best lute piece, for we have to hear the eternal tuning that goes with it. If a lutenist lives to be eighty years old, surely he has spent sixty years tuning. The worst of it is that among a hundred (especially non-professional), scarcely two are capable of tuning accurately«; Ernst Gottlieb Baron: *Study of the Lute (Historisch-theoretisch und practische Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten, Nürnberg 1727)*, translation by Douglas Alton Smith, Redondo Beach, California 1976.

tion, the European middle classes attended numerous benefit concerts or concerts organized by a manager, or by the musicians themselves. They bought tickets to listen to a performance, thus giving rise to a business. In just few years the size of concert halls began to grow.

In this new environment the guitar suffered from a lack of volume when compared to the piano or the bow instruments and sound projection became a real problem for virtuoso guitarists. So a new and productive relationship developed between the player, who demanded an improvement of his guitar, and the luthier, who wanted to win the competition with the factories and maintain his reputation.

The relationship between the guitarist Legnani and the luthier Stauffer in Vienna is one of the first examples of artist endorsement in the history of lutherie. They introduced the Legnani-Stauffer model in 1820. Legnani himself was probably a non-professional luthier who collaborated with Stauffer in constructing this guitar model. The main remarkable improvement concerned the neck which was joined to the body of the instrument with a screw that allowed the player to adjust playing action easily and quickly with a key. Moreover, the part of fingerboard below the twelfth fret was separated from the soundboard, thus increasing its vibration surface.⁹ This building technique influenced Viennese and East European lutherie for more than 50 years (see illustration 9).

Another famous collaboration of this kind was that between Fernando Sor and Joseph Panormo, one of the members of a renowned family of craftsmen.¹⁰ Vincenzo Panormo was born in Palermo (Sicily) in 1734. He moved to Paris when he was nineteen and then settled in London because of the French Revolution. He built guitars and violins inspired by the work of the Italian makers Bergonzi and Stradivari. Three of his four sons Joseph, George and Louis also became luthiers.

Fernando Sor moved to London and became friends with Joseph. We really don't know much about their relationship, but surely it had a strong influence on Joseph and his brothers in their approach to guitar building. Sor showed him his Spanish guitar made by José Martínez in Malaga and communicated his ideas on how to improve the efficiency of the instrument starting from the Spanish model. We can remind ourselves that, in the first chapter of this *Méthode pour la guitare*, Sor demonstrated deep knowledge about lutherie and guitar building technique:

»De même que je ne dirai jamais au lecteur: Voilà ce qu'il faut faire, mais voilà ce qu'il m'a fallu faire, je ne dirai pas non plus comment une guitare doit être faite, mais comment il m'en faut une, et par quelles raisons. Pour que la table d'harmonie soit suffisamment mise en oscillation par l'impulsion que la corde lui communique étant attaquée, il faut qu'elle soit mince et d'un bois très léger; mais étant

9 Westbrook: *The Century That Shaped The Guitar*, p. 66–67.

10 Stuart W. Button: *La famiglia Panormo in Inghilterra*, in: *Il Fronimo* 22 (1994), p. 35–42.

aussi mince qu'il le faut pour la prolongation du son, la tension forte et continue du chevalet l'obligerait à céder au bout de très peu de temps, et elle s'enfoncerait. Pour l'empêcher de fléchir, les luthiers ont imaginé d'y mettre des barres intérieures [...]. Je crois pouvoir assez démontrer qu'un chevalet de la forme indiquée fig. I et construit d'une seule pièce, et un tasseau intérieur construit de telle sorte [...], remplissent le but que je désire. L'expérience l'a prouvé à Londres, où M. J. Panormo a fait quelques guitares sous ma direction, ainsi que M. Sroedere à Pétersbourg. Mais ces faits ne peuvent nullement me dispenser de la démonstration.¹¹

From that moment on a collaboration began that eventually brought Louis (the most famous of the Panormo brothers) to proclaim himself »the only guitar maker in the Spanish style« and to have this claim immortalized on his labels (see illustration 10–13).

Two aesthetics of sound We can now point out two different directions in the development of the idea of the sound of the 19th-century guitar. The first, born in the middle-European area, resulted in an instrument reminiscent of the sound of the viola. It is a little instrument with a shallow sound box and a rather thick stiffened soundboard supported by three or more transverse bars (sometimes slanted). It has a clear, well-focused voice, great balance, and a strong presence in the midrange just like a little fortepiano (see illustration 14). These are instruments such as those built by Fabricatore in Naples, Guadagnini in Turin and Stauffer in Vienna.¹²

The second, born in Spain, has a sound texture closer to the cello. It has deeper ribs and a thinner soundboard with typical fan bracing. The voice is warm and melancholic, with a little less volume but with a lot of melodic appeal. It evokes the »cante jondo« (see illustration 15). Guitars of this kind were built by Spanish makers such as Martínez in Malaga or by Panormo in London.¹³

If the first type of guitar is eminently suitable for the classical aesthetics, the second one met with enthusiastic acceptance in the romantic environment. These two »souls« co-existed for many years, exactly as it happened for the guitar composers of that period; supposedly classical, they often wrote pages strongly inspired by a romantic aesthetic.

In Vienna, Italian guitarists found their fortune (Giuliani, Legnani and others) and the middle-European instrument was favoured, while in Paris and in London the Spanish style was more popular also due to the presence of Spanish players such as Sor and Aguado.

11 In: Ferdinand Sor: *Méthode pour la guitare*, Paris 1830, reprint Genève 1981, p. 7.

12 See also a guitar by Gaetano II Guadagnini, Torino 1836, in Accornero: *Rosa sonora*, p. 14.

13 Marlat: Fernando Sor; José L. Romanillos Vega and Marian Harris Winspear: *The Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar, A Dictionary of the Makers of Plucked and Bowed Musical Instruments of Spain* (1200–2002), Guijosa 2002; *La Guitarra Española – The Spanish Guitar*, exhibition catalogue, New York and Madrid, Madrid 1991.



ILLUSTRATION 1 Guitar by Antonio Monzino, Milano 1826



ILLUSTRATION 2 Back of Monzino's guitar, 1826



ILLUSTRATION 3 French guitar by Marcard



ILLUSTRATION 4 Headmachines on a Panormo guitar

ILLUSTRATION 5 An example of a fingerboard not overlaying the soundboard



ILLUSTRATION 6 An example of overlay fingerboard

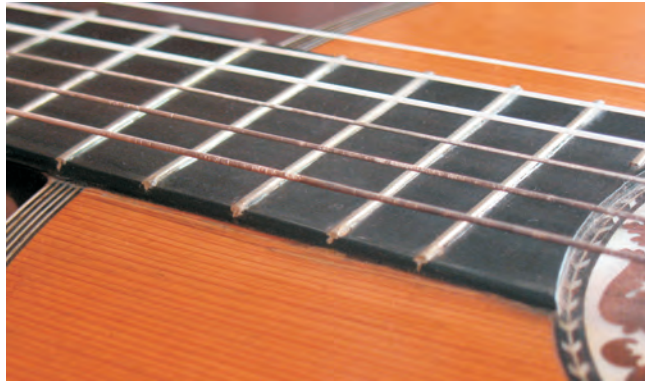


ILLUSTRATION 7 Playing action on a guitar with fingerboard not overlaying the soundboard; the guitar is made by A. Monzino



ILLUSTRATION 8 Playing action on a guitar with overlay fingerboard; the guitar is made by L. Panormo





ILLUSTRATION 9 Fingerboard separated from the soundboard on a Stauffer model guitar



ILLUSTRATION 10 A guitar by Louis Panormo, built in London in 1838



ILLUSTRATION 11 A guitar by Louis Panormo, built in London in 1857

ILLUSTRATION 12 Label of the
1838 guitar by Louis Panormo



ILLUSTRATION 13 Bridge of a
guitar by Louis Panormo



ILLUSTRATION 14 Transverse bars
bracing on a 19th-century guitar
(picture taken during
restoration)



ILLUSTRATION 15 Fan bracing on a
Panormo copy (copy by the author)



We can assume that these different conceptions of sound are responsible for the lack of a common guitar design, when compared to the family of the bowed instruments. In fact, when the popularity of the guitar began to wane (just after 1830), guitarists and luthiers followed many different directions. Some (for example Giuliani) thought that the guitar of the future would be the *terzina* (G-guitar), a higher-pitched instrument with a more focused sound.¹⁴ Giuliani wrote several pages of music and a concerto for this instrument.¹⁵

Others thought that the solution was to add more strings in the bass range (harp guitar). This kind of instrument can be found in the hands of so-called romantic guitarists, such as Kaspar Mertz and Napoleon Coste. But the *terzina* didn't have a great fortune and harp guitars were soon only adopted for use in popular music.¹⁶ Also the French makers of Mirecourt who, after Lacôte's guitar, developed a straight-braced instrument with a sweeter voice, survived in the market supplying shops in the whole of Europe, but mostly for popular use.

It was through the genius of the Spanish luthier Antonio de Torres¹⁷ that the second half of the 19th century saw the birth of a guitar that perfectly suited the music of the late Romantic period. He built an instrument based on the Spanish design but of larger dimensions, lighter in weight, with a very deep response in the bass range and a clear

14 Matanya Ophee: *La chitarra terzina*, in: *Il Fronimo* 6 (1978), p. 8–24. Mauro Giuliani in a letter sent from Naples on 16 January 1824 to Domenico Artaria, his friend and publisher in Vienna, wrote »[...] Quest'ultima opera n. 36 [the second concerto for guitar and orchestra] tutta nuova rimoderata da me, oltreché si trova con l'accompagnamento del quartetto, è ancora fatta in modo che può eseguirsi con tutta piena Orchestra, ma con l'antica Chitarra, ma ridotta con la moderna Terza, a me protetta«.

15 These are the works for *terzina* guitar written by M. Giuliani: Op. 66, *III Rondo per due Chitarre*, Vienna, Steiner, 1816. Op. 67, *Grand Pot-Pourri per due Chitarre*, Vienna, Mechetti qm Carlo, 1816. Op. 69, *La Lira Notturna* *Continente 20 prescelti pezzi i più favoriti e aggradevoli, parte tradotti e parte originalmente composti per Due Chitarre*, Vienna, Mechetti qm Carlo, 1816. Op. 70, *Troisième Grand Concerto pour la Guitarre avec accompagnement de Grand Orchestre*, Vienna, Cappi e Diabelli, 1822. Op. 80, *12 Laendler per Due Chitarre*, Vienna, Weigl, 1818. Op. 92, *12 Neue Laendler fuer Zwey Guitarren*, Vienna, Mollo, 1818. Op. 94, *XII Laendler per Due Chitarre*, Vienna, Weigl, 1819. Op. 101, *Variazioni sulla Cavatina favorita (Deh! calma o ciel) dell'Opera Otello per Chitarra [terzina] con accompagnamento de due Violini, Viola e Violoncello*, Vienna, Diabelli, 1820. Op. 102, *Introduction et Variations sur un Valse favori pour la Guitare [terzina] avec accompagnement de deux Violons, Alto, et Violoncelle*, Vienna, Diabelli, 1826. Op. 104, *Tema Con Variazioni Sull'Aria favorita »Partant pour la Syrie« Per Piano-Forte e Chitarra*, Milano, Ricordi, 1840. Op. 126, *Gran Pot-Pourri Per Flauto o Violino e Chitarra [terzina]*, Milano, Ricordi, 1827. WoO, 2G-2. WoO, 2G-3, *Auswahl der beliebtesten Deutschen vom Apollo Saal gesetzt fuer Zwey Guitarren*, Vienna, Artaria, 1812.

16 See a picture of a guitar by René Lacôte, Paris 1824 in: Accornero: *Rosa sonora*, p. 38.

17 José L. Romanillos: *Antonio de Torres guitar maker – his life and work*, Shaftesbury 1987.

human-like singing voice in the trebles. There's no doubt that the beauty and the allure of its sound impressed the contemporary players so that, from that moment on, the instrument made by Torres came to be recognized as the only type of guitar suitable for classical music.

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