

Fernando Sor's Guitar Technique

It should be easy to ascertain from Sor's many pieces, studies, commentaries and *Method* how he played the guitar, and, yes, there is much there to discuss. However, despite being a man of the Enlightenment, not everything is clear cut. He did not have complete control over his publications, especially the translations, and it is often difficult to say for sure whether a contradiction or glaring omission was his responsibility or not. He also published music over a long period of time, in different countries, with different fashions in harmonic, rhythmic, melodic and performance practices. Add to that his use of different guitars...the story is a complex one.

But we have to start somewhere, and why not start at the end? Sor's *Method*, published when he was 52 years old, presents the mature reflections of a successful, internationally-respected musician. It contains as much text as music, and speaks with an assured voice. Here are some of my favourite Sor quotations from his *Method*:

Regard the effect of the music more than the praise as to skill as a performer

Consider fingering an art

Hold reasoning for a great deal, and routine for nothing

It is ... the harmony which directs my fingering

I make a great distinction between a musician and a note-player

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

A guitarist who is a harmonist, will always have an advantage over one who is not

I love music, I feel it...

But let's get down to practicalities. How did he actually play his own music? Let's start with...

Posture

...I have found nothing better than to have before me a table...

He is being serious. His *Method* goes into some detail of how to rest the guitar on a table edge. For fun, I decided to play this way in some of the videos, and found that it really is a good way to play, providing support and enabling relaxation. However, certain concert situations might dictate otherwise...

Left Hand

It was quite common for guitarists in Sor's time to use the left-hand thumb to fret the sixth string - there are many passages by Giuliani, for example, which use this technique. Sor preferred to keep the thumb behind the neck, and his left hand technique is little different from that used by the vast majority of classical guitarists today.

Right Hand

It is in the use of the right hand that Sor distances himself from most of the players of the day, a fact which he was conscious of. He shared the same hotel in Paris as his compatriot, Dionisio Aguado, a nail player who could dispatch lightning-fast single-line runs, which Sor could not. Sor played without nails. He generally used only the thumb, index and middle fingers. He sometimes placed his little finger on the soundboard.

Never in my life have I heard a guitarist whose playing was supportable, if he played with the nails. The nails can produce but very few gradations in the quality of the sound: the piano passage can never be singing, nor the fortes sufficiently full.

He never uses the right hand for damping the strings, favouring the left hand:

I have placed the fingers of the left hand so as to take the string on the fret which determines the note, pressing it with less force than usual, but not so lightly as to make it yield an harmonic sound.

He sometimes plucks the strings nearer to the fretboard in order to imitate the harp, and sometimes places his left hand fingers half-way between frets, producing a deliberate buzzing sound in imitation of the trumpet. These effects can be used to 'good effect, if not employed too profusely'.

The thumb generally covers four strings, saving the middle and index for the first two strings:

I always hold my hand elevated, so as to enable the thumb to pass over four strings, and the other two fingers in front of the other two strings.

He does not play scale passages by plucking each note individually, preferring instead to pluck the first note of each string and slurring the remaining notes on that string:

I have never aimed to play scales staccato, or detached, nor with great rapidity, because I have been of opinion that I could never make the guitar perform violin passages satisfactorily, while, by taking advantages 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.

This obviously is of great importance. There are many scale passages in Sor's works. Are we to slur them all? Only sometimes would he use two fingers on one string:

Sometimes I thus employ them, but never on other strings than the first, and, very rarely, the second.

Sor used the ring finger only for chords:

...if I rarely use the third finger of the right hand for harmony, I forbid it entirely for melody.

Not allowing the ring finger to play melody notes undoubtedly makes some passages, even in Sor's own works, more difficult than they might be. Later, he admits he is forced to depart from his own principles when playing a melody on the first string while the other fingers are

busy with the accompaniment. In such cases he has to curve his ring finger in a slightly exaggerated manner in order to produce from the string a sound as strong as that produced by the middle finger. We shall discuss this further when we look at individual works elsewhere in this website.

Sor also placed his little finger on the soundboard:

Sometimes I employ the little finger, pressing it perpendicularly on the sounding-board, below the first string, but take care to raise it as soon as it ceases to be necessary.

In Conclusion

Sor's technique stemmed from his attempts to provide an orchestral-style accompaniment on the guitar, with bass, middle and treble registers. He would have liked to always have his middle finger solely used on the first string, his index finger on the second, and his thumb moving over the four bass strings. He wasn't able to play this way all the time, and felt he was going against his 'principles' by moving his hand to different string sets. He would have liked never to have used his ring finger, save for playing chords, but was forced to find a way of utilising it on the first string in certain melodic passages. He was not very good at alternating index and middle fingers on the same string, a technique necessary in scale passages, so developed the use of slurs. Looked at in a negative light, he seems at times to have talked himself into a corner, where reason tells him one thing, but his technique, or lack of it, tells him another. In a more positive light, he was at pains to produce a *musical* technique, one which shunned empty virtuosity, favouring instead the playing of parts, with good tone production and balance between voices. If there is one thing that sets Sor's music apart from all other early 19th-century guitar composers, it is his harmonic thoroughness, and as he quite rightly said:

A guitarist who is a harmonist, will always have an advantage over one who is not.

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