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Guitar Performance in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Paul Sparks

By 1800 guitars with six single strings (tuned *EAdgbe'*) had become the norm. The rosette gave way to an open sound hole, while the neck was lengthened and fitted with a raised fingerboard extending to the sound hole. Nineteen fixed metal frets eventually became standard, the top note sounding *b''*. The bridge was raised, the body enlarged, and fan-strutting introduced beneath the table to support higher tension strings. Treble strings were made of gut (superseded by more durable nylon after World War II), bass strings from metal wound on silk (or, more recently, nylon floss). Tablature became obsolete, guitar music being universally written in the treble clef, sounding an octave lower than written. By the 1820s makers such as Louis Panormo of London were replacing wooden tuning pegs with machine heads for more precise tuning, and creating the prototype of the modern classical guitar (a design perfected in mid-century by Antonio Torres).

Early 19th-century players, such as Fernando Sor (1778-1839) plucked the strings with the right hand fingertips; amongst the leading players of the time, only Dionisio Aguado (1784-1849) recommended fingernails. The thumb, index, and middle fingers of the right hand were used, chords of more than three notes being sounded by the thumb sliding rapidly across several strings, with the ring fin-

ger employed only where a silent string intervened.

There was no common agreement over how to hold the guitar; Sor rested it against a table, Aguado used a metal stand (*tripodion*), while others supported it with a strap, a good position for singers to accompany themselves. The narrowness of the neck allowed the fretting of bass notes with the left hand thumb, Mauro Giuliani (1781-1829) indicating this by the sign *po* (*pollice*). Music from this period occasionally has to be slightly modified by players using modern wide-necked instruments.

Francisco Tárrega (1852-1909) standardized guitar technique in the late 19th century. Nowadays the instrument is supported on the left thigh, with the left foot raised on a small stool. The ring finger is fully integrated into plucking technique, the right hand fingers indicated by *p i m a* (*pulgar, indice, medio, anular*).

Example 1

Fingering of Chords in the Early 19th Century



There are two distinct methods of string attack; *apoyando* (rest stroke), where the plucking finger comes to rest on the adjacent string, and *tirando* (free stroke), where it clears the next string after plucking. *Apoyando* gives a powerful sound, ideal for scale passages and for accenting a melody line, whereas *tirando* is used for

An illustration from *Escuela de Guitarra* by Dionisio Aguado (Madrid, 1825).



An illustration from Fernando Sor's *Méthode pour la guitare* (Paris, 1830). This shows (left) Sor's preferred position, with part of the guitar's body resting on a table; and (right) the position adopted by his French and Italian contemporaries, which he did not favor.

Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



general arpeggio playing, chords, and subordinate parts. Although Tárrega used his fingertips (he was reputed to have weak nails), Andrés Segovia (1893- 1987) and virtually all players since have preferred a combination of flesh and nail, to obtain both sweetness and clarity.

The left hand thumb remains permanently beneath the neck, the four fingers used for fretting indicated 1 2 3 4. In the *barré*, indicated by the letter *C* (*cejilla*) and a Roman numeral showing the fret, a finger (usually the index) is laid flat across the strings; Luigi Legnani (1790-1877) often used an angled *barré*, positioning the first finger so that it stopped the bass strings at one fret, and the top strings at another. Strings are indicated by an encircled number. Differences in tone are obtained by playing *ponticello* (close to the bridge for a metallic sound), or *tastiera* (over the fingerboard producing a sweet sound). These notations are illustrated in Example 2.

Example 2

Fingering and tonal indications



What appear to be phrasing marks in guitar music have a specific technical meaning; when two or more notes are connected by a slur (*ligado*), the first is plucked by the right hand, the others by hammering or pulling the string with the left hand fingers. *Ligados* are used in rapid scale passages, and for legato playing. A straight line

between two notes indicates a *glissando*; if accompanied by a slur, the second note is sounded solely by the pressure of the sliding left-hand finger. In recent decades, Julian Bream (b. 1933) and others have used dotted lines to indicate *ligados*, allowing the unbroken curved line to be used for phrasing. (See Example 3.)

Another distinction between notation and performance occurs in arpeggio passages, where guitarists customarily allow notes on different strings to resonate beyond their written length, as long as the harmony is not disturbed.

In Tárrega's celebrated *tremolo* study *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* the right-hand thumb plays arpeggios, while *i*, *m*, and *a* create a mandolin-like "sustain" in the top part. (See Example 4.)

Example 3



Example 4



Villa-Lobos, in his *Étude 11*, created an effective variant by putting the same note on three different strings, producing an extraordinary resonance. (See Example 5.)

Flamenco guitarists prefer a tremolo with four repeated notes, rather than three. Other flamenco techniques, introduced into the classical repertoire by Spanish composers such as Turina and Falla, include *golpe* (represented by a cross), where the right hand strikes the sound board; and *rasgueado*, a complex strum usually performed with several fingers and indicated by a wavy line, the arrowhead showing the direction of strumming. (See Example 6.)

Example 5

Villa-Lobos, *Étude 11*



Example 6

Some flamenco techniques



Although the guitar is naturally a pizzicato instrument, a special guitar pizzicato (really *étouffé*) is performed by smothering the strings with the heel of the right hand to produce muffled, dry notes.

Natural harmonics (*flageolet*), usually indicated by diamond-shaped notes, can produce the first five overtones of each open string, offering a clear but limited range of bell-like tones. Artificial harmonics—fretting a note with the left hand, touching the string with a right hand finger 12 frets higher while plucking it with another finger—are employed for chromatic lines. A more sophisticated technique used by Miguel Llobet (1878-1937) is to play a melody in artificial harmonics (touching the string with the index finger and plucking it with the ring finger) while simultaneously sounding an accompaniment with the thumb and middle fingers.

Trills and mordents are usually played by plucking the first note, then hammering or pulling all subsequent notes. However, in recent decades some performers, dissatisfied with the limited volume produced by this technique, have preferred to finger the notes on adjacent strings, plucking them alternately in rapid succession. The sixth string is frequently lowered to *D* and, in transcriptions of piano pieces by Granados and Albeniz, the 5th course is also occasionally retuned to *G*. Composers should not expect performers to accomplish this quickly, as guitar strings tend to wander back towards their previous pitch when retuned, and need repeated adjustment. Many contemporary composers have demanded a variety of novel effects from the instrument, such as plucking strings between the nut and the machine heads, sliding a moistened finger across the back of the guitar, and crossing the sixth string over the fifth to produce a snare drum sound; these can be extremely effective, but are not regarded as part of conventional technique. Although the guitar can produce a considerable volume of sound, it is easily masked by other instruments, and many soloists use discreet amplification when performing concertos. Henze, Mahler, Schoenberg, Webern, and Boulez have all used the guitar in chamber and orchestral works; it is particularly effective in *rasgueado* style or in single note passage performed *apoyando*.

* * *

The *terz* guitar, tuned a minor third higher than the standard form, was popular in the 19th century. In some duets by Giuliani, the parts are written in different keys and are intended for guitar and *terz guitar*, although they can be performed with a *capo tasto* on the third fret of a conventional guitar. This device, used by flamenco and folk musicians, is an artificial *barré* placed across the fingerboard to raise the pitch of all the strings. Steel strung guitars (often with two strings per course, and generally played with a plectrum or with metal "picks" fixed to the fingertips) are used by most non-classical singers to accompany themselves, and are especially suitable for strummed chordal styles of accompaniment, such as in dance bands. Blues musicians often play "bottleneck guitar," wearing a tube of metal or glass on the third finger of their left hand, which slides along the strings to produce a wailing sound. Non-classical players frequently read from tablature or chord symbols rather than standard notation. Amplified electric guitars are almost invariably steel strung, and are usually played with a plectrum, the very low action facilitating rapid scale playing.

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¹ See also the bibliographical listings in James Tyler's article (preceding).