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Freedom and Determinism of the Guitar

From Baroque to Avant-garde

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Foreword

I am a product of the Spanish Republican Diaspora.

Amidst this circle of political migrants, I first became attracted to the poetry of our traditional music which is dramatically expressed through flamenco. Initially self-taught, then as a semi-professional guitarist, I joined the show business circle of flamenco dance in Paris for several years. Classical guitar opened up other larger horizons much later on.

A flamenco player inherits a musical language that first seems set in rules but actually enjoys phenomenal freedom in its writing to inscribe it in the instrument. Guitar movement is spontaneous, free from any determined rules, in line with the inherent, natural characteristics of the guitar.

On the opposite end, a classical guitarist must also submit to languages, but this time they determine the organisation of the instrument in order to fit in. The player then needs to build a technical body ad hoc, to respond to the demands of the determined styles as dictated by external rules, a set of different exogenous movements. Therefore, we have two instrumental gestures, two instrumental writing organisations and finally, two different ways of understanding and sounding the guitar.

I wanted to clarify how and why some technical gestures have shaped various styles of writing through history, styles that are different or even in opposition, or the other way around.

Any note written on music paper is in fact the symbol of the musical thought of the composer only. This thought, for the guitarist (and especially for the guitarist), is rendered by a gesture: the necessary one to translate thought into sound. I imagined a concept, a tool, that accounts for this and that I call "technical style" (*style-technique*), which

is both the technical gesture in the guitar space which therefore creates a playing style (or a mode of playing), and on the other hand creates a writing style. I would say that a technical style is "the digital organization of writing".

We can therefore talk of "technical styles", which can be reduced down to two symmetrical poles that I would call the natural inherent technical style (*style-technique propre et naturel*) and the refined noble technical style (*style-technique des lettres de noblesse*). These two extremes, according to their reciprocal amounts define a frame, a two dimensional system in which the guitar's diverse forms of being are defined.

The natural inherent technical style appeared during the early 17th century. Its "birth rights" are illustrated through the words of Italian Baroque guitarist, Benedetto Sanseverino, who wrote and defined it as such, in Milan in 1620: "it suffices that each player modifies their hand in various ways, following the skill of their imagination, in order to satisfy the style and total adherence to the true way of playing the guitar, in the Spanish manner". This style simply stems from an analytical observation of the hands possibilities, specially the right hand, in order to allow for their complete freedom. It is often viewed as simple instrumental gestures, more or less popular and devalued. Nevertheless, we will demonstrate how tempting the technique has been, resurfacing even among guitarists of the nineteenth and twentieth century for the obvious reason that it is the natural way towards a full resonance of the instrument. Thus, it is in direct relation with the fullness of sound, one of the guitar's greatest assets, which gives the instrument its edge and *raison d'être*, in relation to other instruments.

The refined noble technical style aspires to another ambitious musical goal, which is polyphony, emerging a century earlier, through the skilful hands of the vihuelists and from where hails the concert classical guitar.

This artistic aspiration acquired its "birth rights" with Juan Bermudo's principles written in 1555: he insisted that true masters of the vihuela would be defined by their ability to transcribe "an entire Mass" on their instrument. Nothing less. Throughout time, this technical style imposed over the fingerboard its composition rules which belonged elsewhere, in particular, the keyboard. And all this in direct relationship with the written score. Here we must consider the margin of freedom this style concedes to the guitar, taking into account the constraints imposed by our capricious instrument.

We are immediately confronted by the depth of the conflict. This approach meets physical limitations, mainly coming from the left hand, performing an arduous task and mechanical issues, which consist of shortening the strings with only four fingers, over unusual sport on a large two-dimensional fret board, with a long vibrating string. With so few open strings playable with the right hand, all this has to deliver solo concert music of polyphonic nature.

"My feeling is that the classical guitar, as we hear it normally, is a betrayal to the original instrument: if fact, what we listen is a product of the nineteenth century. There was an attempt to mimic other instruments and transform the guitar into a respectable object, that is one capable of playing classical music" says Tristan Murail, in his own words[1].

All of this had more far-reaching consequences than we can imagine on the evolution of the guitar; we will consider its various aspects during the Baroque era and in flamenco music, as well as the impressionistic guitar as dreamt by its composers, the Segovia repertoire, the Spectral school and a few composers from the 1970's up to now. I have brought myself to question the usual understanding of guitar

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[1] Tristan Murail, "Interview", *Les Cahiers de la guitare*, no. 12, 1984.

history and have thought out another paradigm, another reading grid, another connecting thread. We will see these sometimes paradoxical determinisms and sometimes surprising freedoms at work in the guitar's inclusion in modernity or conformism.

1. The First Baroque: decadence or modernity?

The end of the sixteenth century is a converging point for two phenomena that enable the birth and success of the guitar. Firstly, European music fully embraces the new concept of vertical tonal harmony, and secondly, the new way to make the instrument resonate, a *natural inherent technical style* establishes itself. This includes the "*rasgueado*" (chords strummed downwards and upwards in English), batteries, tremolo[2], and a particular use of the arpeggio, with regards to the right hand. These techniques will ensure the global and lasting success of the guitar throughout the following century by imparting the instrument with a new direction: the abandonment of polyphonic counterpoint in favour of the inherent freedom of the new style.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Spaniards are said to have added a fifth bass course on the earlier guitar, which had only four courses until then. This issue is controversial but in any case, it is far more important to understand the *reason* it was added, rather than *who* added it. It was essential that the new instrument be better adapted to the new vertical chord writing, a sheer "revolution" at the time. It gradually imposed itself in the new aesthetics of the First Baroque, thanks to the influence of key musicians like Caccini or Peri. It demanded that such an instrument be able to achieve maximum efficiency and ease for the left hand, in delivering the perfect chords, a novelty at the time. The *rasgueado* technique is decisive:

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[2] The classical tremolo probably existed as early as the seventeenth century but was only mentioned, in regards to the Baroque guitar only in the eighteenth century through an anonymous manuscript kept in Vienna.

it requires that the strings be played all at once. A quick examination shows that the possibilities of the fingers *in first position* (the easiest) on the new five-course Baroque guitar allows for the usual major and minor chords of D, E, F, G, A and C and this, with a remarkable economy of left hand fingerings. It is for this reason that many guitars of this period, were designed exclusively for this type of playing which did not exceed the fifth position and only had few frets. Indeed, most of these chords positions only use three or even two left hand fingers. The remaining fingers would then be free to play ornaments, which allows the strumming of rhythmic beats that are both harmonic and, in some way, melodic also. On the earlier four-course Renaissance guitar, these chords would not have been at all possible, with an inexistent third or in the form of unpleasant reversals. On the six-course lute of the time, the opposite was true. Playing all the strings in a series of chords without ringing the unwanted strings would be a far too complex exercise: there were too many strings to play, especially with the increasingly frequent addition of a seventh and eighth course[3]. The limited span of the four left-hand fingers would hinder the performance on each string, of the essential notes of a given chord.

With its five course of strings, the guitar had thus reached an ideal balance, firstly, determined by the possibilities of the left hand fingers and secondly, by the specific use of the right hand. Thus, *a fundamental guitar tool* was created, one that is still very much in use today and what we know as "chord charts". The harmonic requirements of the new

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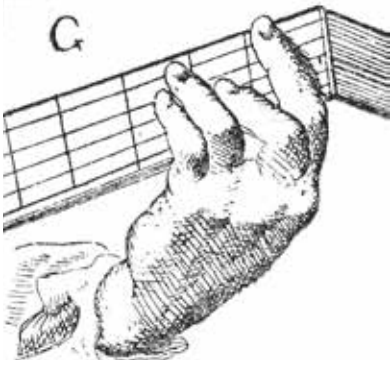
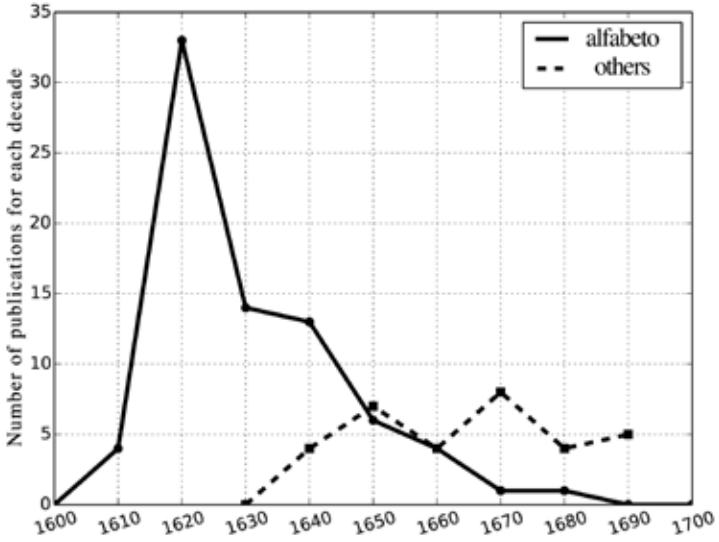
[3] This tendency to add bass strings to the lute – which totaled six to thirteen courses during the sixteenth to the eighteenth century – should not be confused with the addition of the fifth course to the guitar which may seem paradoxical. The lute sought to increase its polyphonic possibilities and the guitar, its harmonic possibilities.

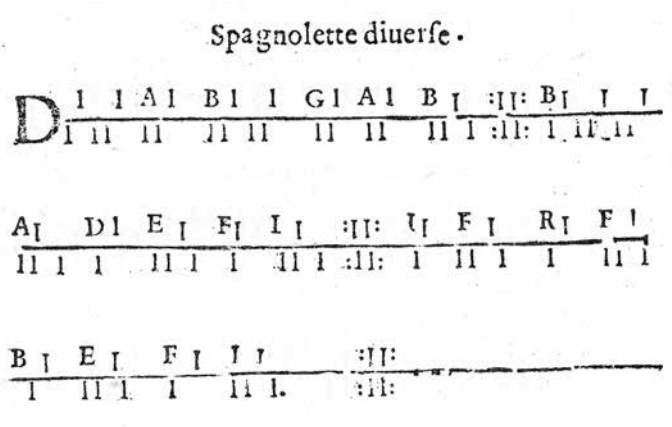
aesthetics in *rasgueado* performance, strumming, arpeggios etc. on all the courses were therefore met. This simplicity of technical means would allow for the guitar's greater success among amateur players than during the previous century. A schematic notation was simply sufficient in attributing to each chord, a symbol corresponding to a left-hand position on the neck. Neither the reading of notes nor even the tablature would be necessary to decipher this very simple code (which summarizes in a single symbol the five notes of the chord) and thus allowing for performance in the *Spanish style*. These chord positions were published in 1596 by Joan Carlos Amat in Barcelona. Then Italy followed, where they became permanently established and named *alfabeto* since each position is indicated by a capital letter, except for the E minor chord represented by a cross. See below, one of the positions of the fingers drawn on the five courses, F major represented here by the letter "G" in the *alfabeto*:



The number of strings and the manner of playing are thus determinants of its success. Proof of this success lies in the considerable number of book publications using the *alfabeto* system and comparing it with the following styles:



At a glance, the supposed period of decadence in the First Baroque is, on the opposite, one of highest activity, right until the Second Baroque. They are books containing brief instructions for performing techniques, for visual transposition and a large number of different pieces, mainly dances, sometimes also for voice and guitar. Their content varies between fifty and a hundred pages. Many books come from Italy where the printing industry seemingly leads that of Spain, and where printing costs are probably lower. Notation of pieces, like the *Spagnoletta* from the *Intavolatura di chitarra spagnuola* by Giovanni Ambrosio Colonna (Milan, 1637) below cannot be more rudimentary considering the costs of the engraving and only reveals a minimum of information to the reader. Nevertheless, the authors, give directions for the upward or downward beats, written above or below the line, in addition to the chord positions of the *alfabeto*:

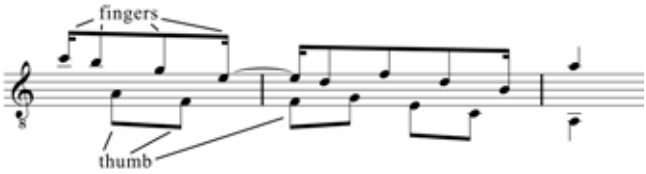


This proves the importance given to proper performance of the rhythmic technical style defining the Spanish style, which Benedetto Sanseverino's observation had already pointed to. The guitar had become an agent of modernity by contributing to the dissemination or rather the popularization of this novelty called tonal harmony. It opened up a gap through which the Italians, undisputed European masters of the arts, surged forward. The Renaissance guitar was only an instrument with very limited polyphonic capacities compared to the lute; the baroque guitar of 1600, with its coarse *rasgueado* sounds could be heard as *continuo* even in Opera, from Monteverdi to Lully. This era marks the birth of the guitar, if we may use this word to properly seal the identity of an original instrumental and not as a mere instrumental variation from a larger family of instruments, such as lutes or plucked string instruments.

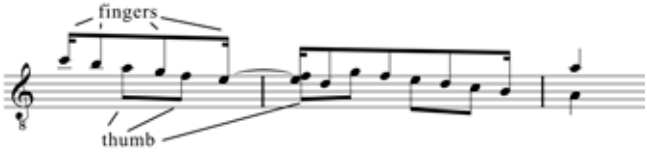
Meanwhile, the Italians enrich and refine the early Spanish style, more so with the use of the *campanella,* a fashionable, clear example of the natural technical style. It consists of playing scales, generally with great velocity, along with a perfect legato, while respecting the spontaneous mechanism of the right hand and its alternating thumb. The

dream of all guitarists would finally become "accessible" and seamlessly natural in any case, thanks to the skilful use of "small octaves", these high-pitched strings doubling up the bass strings on each course on the baroque guitar.

In this excerpt from a 1672 Gaspar Sanz tablature, fingers on the first and second strings alternate with the thumb on bass strings (assumed as such for illustration purposes on the modern guitar), as it is straightforward and natural, in "broken style" (*style brisé*) with two alternating voices:



But the music above is deceptive, because the same passage, when executed *with the same gesture* on the baroque guitar, is radically different, and thanks to the small octaves, we produce a scale with remarkable bell-like characteristics – hence the name of *campanella* – with resonances close to that of a harp:



Thus, among the Baroque players who would always value the performance of the right hand, a thumb could have a melodic function in the high voice[4].

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[4] In the same way, the succession of the thumb and the fingers is spontaneously translated on the keyboards and the harp by a succession of notes within one and the same voice. This operation is not that of the classical guitar.