

The Transcriber's Art – #52

Joseph Haydn

by Richard Yates

“Even though the guitar does not produce the same notes as the orchestra, nor in quantity nor in register, the accompaniment will be the same.” –Fernando Sor

Some composers are found hiding in obscure crevices of music history; others can be overlooked in plain view. My amateur status and retirement have combined to allow me the luxury of wandering across centuries, as whim and chance determine, looking for interesting sources for guitar transcription. After years of having largely avoided the Classical Period, in 1986 William Kanengiser's transcription of the *Rondo alla Turca* from Mozart's Piano Sonata, K. 331 came across my field of view and grabbed my attention. I then spent a considerable period of immersion in Mozart's music looking for another of his piano sonatas that I could manage. I eventually found K. 570 and then roamed over to the music of Joseph Haydn, a close colleague and friend of Mozart's. But after uncovering little of interest there—whether due to inexperience or flagging attention—I moved on. Now, after 25 years, I returned to discover that I am a bit bemused at my previous blindness, for Haydn is a rich source for guitarists.

Of course, other guitarists have borrowed from Haydn for centuries, beginning in his own era. Fernando Sor's *Méthode pour la Guitare* from 1830 contains a long chapter about his arrangement of a section from Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*. Nearly 200 years later, a reference in Sor prompted a transcription by Mark Delpriora of a choral fugue from the same oratorio. Sor wrote that he played the fugue on the guitar, and Delpriora's version, intended to be in the style of a Sor transcription, confirms the plausibility of the claim as well as providing us with a substantial addition to the guitar repertoire.

The Sor chapter on “Accompaniments,” while portending valuable insights into his process of transcription that we can apply today, falls short of this expectation. Sor discusses a few basic observations such as the necessity of reducing textures while maintaining their proportions, and acknowledges that, “I would like to explain well how I reasoned to produce accompaniments, but ... this entire subject properly belongs to a treatise that I propose to publish: On harmony as applied to the Guitar.” Unfortunately, as Matanya Ophee notes, no such treatise is known to have been written. (All Sor quotations in this article are taken from Ophee's translation made in collaboration with Carlos Barrientos. Refer to the Resources list following this article.)

In hopes of extracting Sor's reasoning from his example, I turned to the next section, “Analysis of the Accompaniment of a Fragment of the Oratorio by Haydn (The Creation).” The text is a seemingly endless account of fingering decisions that are primarily about efficient movement. These are certainly sensible, if unremarkable, and the applications of his “theory of thirds and sixths” has historical interest, but Sor gives little insight into the process by which he arrived at the particular notes to finger.

And so the next direction of my digging was to directly compare the Haydn *Creation* score with Sor's. I assembled a half dozen versions of the Haydn score, including both full scores and piano reductions, but the most relevant one was elusive. As Ophee writes, the Italian lyrics in Sor's version, and the similarity of his guitar accompaniment to piano reductions of the orchestral score, suggest that Sor may have used the Pleyel edition of 1801, the only version known to have had Italian lyrics. The only copy I could find was locked in the vault of the Cook Music Library at Indiana University in Bloomington.

From my email request, the music reference librarian, Carla Williams, promptly took digital photos of a couple pages and sent them back. This version was important to consult because of rather substantial discrepancies between other editions of the Haydn score and the accompaniment made by Sor. There was the possibility that the version to which Sor referred was the source of these discrepancies. But examination of the Pleyel edition left unsettling, or at least unexplained, questions. If the Pleyel edition is Sor's source, then he made quite consequential changes and his approach was closer to recomposition than transcription. In the first section—an accompanied vocal solo—Sor's version of the melody is different in many places, both in the notes themselves and in the underlayment of the Italian lyrics. A direct comparison of a few measures is illuminating. The vocal lines in Figure 1 show the kinds of differences that crop up in Sor's score.

Even more striking is the discrepancy in the harmonic progression. This degree of recomposition of the harmony is limited to these measures; the rest are identical to the original with some minor inversions of bass notes.

Fernando Sor

Pleyel piano reduction

Figure 1

The differences in harmony—I have added the analysis symbols—certainly change the essential function of those two measures. Whether it was Sor, or an unknown source on whom he relied, who made the changes, the reason for them will remain a mystery for now.

Transcription and the Classical Period

If transcription aims to preserve essential features of a piece of music, then the historical, stylistic context has strong relevance. Sor's career extended a bit past the nominal limits of the Classical Period but, as shown in his texts, examples and musical quotations, he clearly saw his place as in the tradition of Haydn and Mozart. In the Classical Period articulated, periodic, symmetrical phrases became important as contrasted with the often continuous and overlapping structures of Baroque counterpoint. Accordingly, guitar

transcription should arrange notes and fingers to allow such phrases to cohere and to be shaped along their natural contours.

A common texture in this period in keyboard music emulates an accompanied song where the right hand plays a single line melody and the left provides harmonic support. Guitar transcription should therefore place a high priority on the connection and integrity of the melody and make adjustments, as needed, to the accompaniment. Sor expressed it this way: “If an air is composed to be accompanied by the guitar, I strongly believe in the simplicity of the accompaniment, because the entire effect in this case, must depend on the song itself and the accompaniment has no other purpose than to mark the beat and provide the harmonic support required by the bass.”

Another tendency in this period is for slower root movement, often with whole measures constituting only one harmony. Recognition of this feature can greatly aid transcription because it allows pruning redundant harmony notes without weakening or adding ambiguity to the harmonic support. But care must be taken though, as Sor wrote: “One needs to be knowledgeable and tactful to know which notes can be deleted while causing the least amount of damage to the effect.”

All of these observations were put to use in transcribing a piano piece by Haydn.

Haydn Adagio, F-major, H. XVII:9

Although Haydn’s many piano sonatas are, as a rule, too large and complex to manage on the guitar, many individual sonata movements and other stand-alone pieces for piano in Hoboken category XVII work well. This issue’s featured transcription is an *Adagio* for piano, originally in the key of F major that first appeared in 1786. Transposition to G major yields a key more agreeable to the guitar while preserving intact the wide-ranging melody that covers more than two octaves.

The opening measure presents the first challenge for a guitar transcription. See Figure 2 and note that the piano part has been transposed to the key of G major to match the key of the guitar version. While it is true that all the notes of the first measure can be transferred directly to the guitar, whether or not they all *should be* is another matter. The last three eighth-note chords are densely voiced and in a low register. We must always remember that the actual pitch of the guitar is an octave lower than it appears, and so closely-voiced chords on the lowest three strings can sound muddy and indistinct. In his original compositions, Sor showed that he was well aware of this. An admittedly cursory scan through his entire collected works turned up fewer than half a dozen instances of simultaneous notes on the fifth and sixth strings (except for full, six-note chords). Far more usual is to have interior notes closer to the top line and at least a fifth above the bass. We might take our cue from Sor when he faced a similar situation, “Not being able to do them all, I must realize those which constitute the essence of the phrase.” The solution is to thin the three-note chords down to two notes by preserving the essential, outer voices: the melody and the bass line. The result in no way renders the harmonic progression ambiguous and has the benefit of letting some needed air into the texture. This modification also allows consistent movement into the first chord of the second measure, which is also reduced to two notes. And here another advantage is to ease the execution of the following ornament, which would otherwise be more difficult without the barré.

Figure 2

The accompaniment in measures 5 and 6—see Figure 3—shows an application of the observation about the speed of harmonic motion. Each of these measures constitutes only one harmony: the subdominant and then the first inversion of the tonic. In the original score, the third above the bass continues through each measure, but in the transcription, after the first beat, it has been pared back to the single bass note. No uncertainty is introduced about the harmony, but the execution of the melody is much easier as a result. This adjustment to the accompaniment is used in several other sections of the transcription, as well.

Figure 3

Those last two paragraphs have a lot of description about only a few notes. Mindful of Sor’s caution that by analyzing all of this accompaniment he “would needlessly wear down the attention of the reader,” I will look at only one other feature of this transcription as it relates to Sor’s methods. The Haydn Adagio contains a few rapid, though brief, scale runs that are not so common in Sor’s music. His text in the Method gives us some clues to this tendency: “My whole secret is that I prefer solid reasoning and good musicianship to an ostentatious display of technical abilities.” He also gives insight into the ways in which he overcame what may have been a lack of speed, at least in comparison to his friend Dionisio Aguado. The first is by using a right-hand technique now associated more with the lute: “This observation convinced me to perform passages of this species with the thumb and the index...” the second is to use frequent left-hand slurs: “...I never aimed at playing scales with a full alteration of right-hand fingers with great speed ... I attack only the first note which begins each group of which the passage is made up.”

There are advantages and disadvantages to both of these techniques. Thumb-index alternation can produce rapid scales, but tends to impart a strong-weak articulation to the note pairs. This was entirely appropriate, even characteristic, of earlier musical times, but the Classical preference was for such passages to be smooth and even. Slurring in scales can facilitate speed and impart lightness and grace to the line, but it carries the same risk of unevenness and a possible liability of the emphases working against the meter, that is, slurring onto strong beats. These considerations do not preclude the use of these techniques, but do counsel attention to the risks. And whether or not you use one of Sor's recommendations, keep in mind the Classical Period's ideals of elegance and grace. Shape the line towards its destination and leave the haste to later eras.

Please send your ideas and comments to:

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Resources

Delpriora, Mark, *The "Creation Fugue" by Joseph Haydn, transcribed in the style of Fernando Sor*, Editions Orphée, Columbus, 2010.

Haydn, Joseph, *Joseph Haydn Werke*, edited by Joseph Haydn Institute Cologne, G. Henle Verlag, Munich, 1955.

Haydn, Joseph, *La Création: oratorio, traduit de l'allemand et mis en vers français par Desrioux et en Italiens par ******, Pleyel, Paris, 1801(?). Copy in the Cook Music Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Rosen, Charles, *The Classic Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997.

Sor, Fernando, *Method for the Guitar*, translated and edited, with commentary by Matanya Ophee, Editions Orphée, Columbus, 2010. Ophee's commentary nearly matches the length of Sor's text itself, and provides voluminous historical details, context and insights.

Adagio

F-dur, H. XVII:9

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Joseph Haydn
1732–1809

Adagio

The musical score is written for guitar in F major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of five systems of music, each with a treble clef and a guitar-specific 8va marking. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The score includes various guitar-specific markings such as fingerings (III, II, V₄, VII₃), dynamics (m), and articulation (accents, slurs). The piece is transcribed for guitar by Richard Yates.

System 1 (Measures 1-2):
Measure 1: Treble clef, 8va. Treble staff: G4 (III), A4, B4, C5. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: III.
Measure 2: Treble staff: D5, E5, F5, G5. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: II.

System 2 (Measures 3-4):
Measure 3: Treble staff: G5, A5, B5, C6. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: V₄.
Measure 4: Treble staff: D6, E6, F6, G6. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: ②.

System 3 (Measures 5-6):
Measure 5: Treble staff: G6, A6, B6, C7. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: ②.
Measure 6: Treble staff: D7, E7, F7, G7. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: ②. Dynamics: m.

System 4 (Measures 7-8):
Measure 7: Treble staff: G7, A7, B7, C8. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: ②.
Measure 8: Treble staff: D8, E8, F8, G8. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: ②.

System 5 (Measures 9-12):
Measure 9: Treble staff: G8, A8, B8, C9. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: VII₃.
Measure 10: Treble staff: D9, E9, F9, G9. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: VII₃.
Measure 11: Treble staff: A9, B9, C10. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: VII₃.
Measure 12: Treble staff: D10, E10, F10, G10. Bass staff: F3, C4. Fingering: VII₃.

15

III

18

II

IV₄

20

VII

①

⑥

23

③

②

p

f

27

VII

②

p

30

f

a

③

②

①

f