

The Transcriber's Art - #47
Manuel Ponce, *Malgré tout*
By Richard Yates

MEXICO CITY – A routine trip has ended in disaster for a local resident, Jesús Contreras. Although full details of the incident are not available at this time, the injuries suffered by Señor Contreras were so severe as to require the amputation of his right arm. The full depth of this tragedy could be grasped only when it was discovered that Senor Contreras is a successful sculptor.

Despite everything this implied for his career, Contreras continued to sculpt and soon produced a statue that can be seen today in the Museo Nacional de Arte which he titled *Malgré tout* or, “despite everything.” Although many of his previous works were cast in bronze (after having been molded in clay), *Malgré tout* is a life-sized figure carved in marble. *Meanwhile ...*

Manuel Ponce, while perhaps best-known for his guitar compositions, was also a highly accomplished pianist. Indeed, his compositions for piano outnumber those for guitar, and he also wrote songs, orchestral works and arrangements of folk songs. Although he studied in Bologna, Berlin and Paris, Ponce's affinity for the folk idioms of his native country were a foundation of his musical imagination. Heitor Villa-Lobos, wrote:

“I remember that I asked him at that time if the composers of his country were as yet taking an interest in native music, as I had been doing since 1912, and he answered that he himself had been working in that direction. It gave me great joy to learn that in that distant part of my continent there was another artist who was arming himself with the resources of the folklore of his people in the struggle for the future musical independence of his country.”

One of Ponce's earliest published compositions—the first version appeared when he was eighteen years old—borrows the title from Contreras' sculpture and is dedicated: *A la memoria del malogrado escultor Jesús Contreras* [“To the memory of the ill-fated sculptor Jesús Contreras”]. The piece is for piano and is written for the left hand alone. This poignant story behind the music seems to be retold and embellished with every edition and reprint of Ponce's *Malgré tout*. In some tellings, the two were friends and the arm was lost in an accident. Jesús Herrera's edition (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005) sifts historical evidence and shows that the arm was actually amputated in Paris because of cancer—which proved fatal within two years—and also concludes that Ponce had probably written it without knowing Contreras.

Music as metaphor

Despite any mythical elaborations, Ponce's *Malgré tout* remains a compelling piece of music and embodies what pianist Joseph Smith calls “music as metaphor.” In his

collection “Rare Finds for Piano” (The Steinway Library of Piano Music, Ekay Music, Inc., 2005) Smith writes:

“We all agree that music is sound. However, sometimes other elements can be vitally important to a musical piece ... *Malgré tout* is a particularly striking example of the alchemy between musical, visual and programmatic elements since the sight of the music being executed by the left hand alone here constitutes a metaphor explained by the title, which enhances the melancholy music.”

In making transcriptions from one instrument to another, we want to identify and preserve those elements that are essential to the music. In this piece, music as metaphor is an unusual feature and one that is intimately bound to the mood, the origin and even the appearance in performance. While it is intriguing to consider the possibilities for metaphor in a guitar transcription, care must be taken to avoid forcing the issue. I considered a version in which the rapid sixteenth and thirty-second note runs were played entirely by the left hand. While this is possible—and in the hands of a virtuoso might even be an impressive feat—it seems to me to risk edging beyond metaphor and into ostentatious caricature. As guitarists, we might best be satisfied simply to think “despite everything that places obstacles to playing keyboard music on six fretted strings, I am still able to deliver a convincing performance of *Malgré tout* on the guitar.”

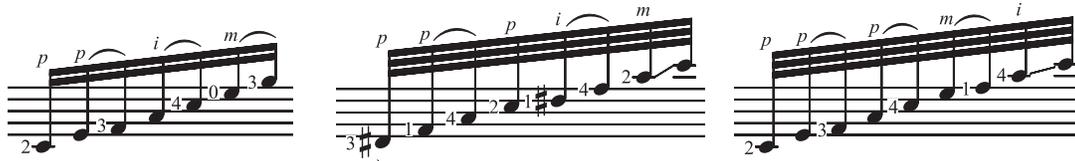
The transcription

There were relatively few puzzles to solve in making the transcription. That the original was for the left hand alone reduces the span of intervals to something closer to what is convenient on the guitar. Interestingly, Ponce did not always limit simultaneous notes to the width of one hand’s span. The first notes of the first full measure are the same interval in the guitar and piano versions, although they cannot be played simultaneously on the piano but must be arpeggiated instead. There is a large body of keyboard music written for one hand. Guitarists can find promising material for transcription in this genre although, in my experience, things do not always work out as easily as you might think. Pianists can do remarkable things with only one hand, and they still have access to all those octaves!

The music uses the rhythm of the *habanera*, which is most familiar in the one from Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. The *habanera* is believed to have originated in Cuba in the mid 19th century. From there it spread to Spain and back to the western hemisphere, where it eventually was integrated into the tango. Around the turn of the century, it was popular across Europe and the Latin American countries.

The rapid runs in the first section are perhaps more difficult on the piano than on the guitar. I have fingered them to take advantage of slurs and slides to ease the difficulty. With careful planning and slow initial practice they are not problematic. It will help to think of them as upbeats to the following measure. As such, their speed is less important than that they aim for, and decisively land on the downbeat. You can start them relatively slowly and then accelerate. I have not included right-hand fingerings in the score as that

topic seems to be so highly idiosyncratic. When I play them I find these fingerings to be the simplest: [insert figure 1 from file “figure1.eps” as below]



It also helps to rest the ‘i’ and ‘m’ fingers on their strings in preparation, as the thumb gets things started. The run can then be executed almost as a single gesture.

Please send comments and suggestions to:

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Malgré tout

(A Pesar de Todo)

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Manuel Ponce
(1882–1948)

Moderato ♩

8 *mf* ④ 3 3 II

4 *cresc.* 7 II ⑥

7 *f* *p* ⑤ 3 3 II

12 9 VII ⑤

15 1. Final Fine 2. *decresc.* *p* ⑤ *p*

19 III ② ③ III V₃ *espressivo*

23 *cresc.* *f*

28 *f* *rall.*

33 *a tempo*

38 *f* *ten.*

42 *cresc.*

47 *ff* *rall.* D.S.  al Fine