

# Tárrega and The Modern Classical Guitar

THESIS: The modern classical guitar reestablishes its relevance, as well as reached its first Golden Age, in the Romantic Era through the efforts of Francisco Tárrega as a performer, composer, and musician.

The guitar had never truly had a moment in time to shine before the Romantic era, as it was never a truly developed instrument with flaws that were noticeable to non-guitarist-composers. Of course, the lute was a highly popular instrument during the Renaissance and Baroque eras but even with the works of many composers behind it, the lute found itself performing mainly art songs where it would be overshadowed by keyboard instruments. This would eventually lead to the invention of the piano where the sheer volume of the instrument would make the lute fall out of fashion. The lute was not forgotten, as later guitarists would arrange lute works for the guitar, but the focus would be on more famous composers such as Bach, Vivaldi, Dowland, etc. Fortunately, the guitar followed different origins where it was a four double-stringed instrument that was eventually transformed into the six-stringed instrument we know today where it was popularized back then by Sor, Aguado, etc. At Tárrega's point in the Romantic era, the guitar was being eclipsed by the improved pianoforte, which set the bar higher by demanding virtuosity as well as expression. Even after the development of what will be the modern classical guitar, many musicians considered the guitar as "a discredited instrument with limited defense."<sup>1</sup>

## Before Tárrega

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<sup>1</sup> *Francisco Tárrega: Guitar Transcriptions*. (Madrid: Verso, 2004), CD-ROM, 17.

It's important to establish where the guitar stood before Tárrega. Three guitarists Fernando Sor, Dionisi Aguado, and Julian Arcas stand out.

Fernando Sor is one of the guitars greatest composers and performers; he has written over 400 pieces for the guitar and authored one of the most famous guitar methods that many guitarists still utilize. Sor was a widely travelled musician around Europe where he'd been an established musician since the age of 19<sup>2</sup>. In the last decade of his life, Sor moved to Paris where he completely devoted the rest of his craft to the guitar; there he would make friends and perform with other guitarists such as Aguado and Coste<sup>3</sup>.

Dionisio Aguado was of the same time frame as Sor and the two shared a close friendship. Although the compositional output was never as much as Sor, his genius showed through the several studies he wrote for guitar as well as the method book that he published in 1825. One of the more unusual points of Aguado was his invention of a guitar accessory called the tripodison, a three-legged stand that the guitar would rest in an upward angle position while it was being played<sup>4</sup>. Aguado claimed that it increased the volume and ease of playing guitar, but it didn't gain much support and became extinct shortly after<sup>5</sup>.

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2 Maurice Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar, It's Evolution, Players, and Personalities Since 1800* (United Kingdom: Ashley Mark Publishing Company, 2002), 277.

3 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 277.

4 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 29.

5 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 29.

Julian Arcas was one of the most important figures in 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish music; he was a virtuosic guitarist who was also well regarded in his composition and arrangements of national melodies and dances for the guitar<sup>6</sup>. Arcas laid the foundation for what Tárrega would be by first inspiring a young Tárrega to want to pursue that instrument, second by becoming his teacher in classical guitar, and finally by influencing the luthier, Don Antonio de Torres Jurado, to improve the guitar to a point where his innovations are still utilized in today's guitars<sup>7</sup>.

#### Tárrega's Life/performing and composing career

Tárrega was born on November 21, 1852 and died in Spain, December 5, 1909; his talent as a guitarist and a musician was recognized at a very early age, and in 1874 studied at the Madrid Conservatory in harmony and composition<sup>8</sup>. Tárrega was proficient in both piano and guitar, and it's been noted that he has played a recital half on piano and half on guitar, at the end he asked the audience which they preferred more and they said guitar which led Tárrega to become the guitarist we know today<sup>9</sup>.

As a performer, Tárrega sought to create more works for the guitar rather than reflect and perform older pieces of previous eras. Tárrega's transcription of various works for the classical guitar has drawn a considerable amount of attention since

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6 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 37.

7 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 337.

8 Maurice Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar, It's Evolution, Players, and Personalities Since 1800* (United Kingdom: Ashley Mark Publishing Company, 2002), 288-289.

9 Summerfield, *The Classical Guitar*, 288.

the repertory of Romantic-era music for the classical guitar at the time was quite small. It was a virtuosic proving ground for Tárrega to expand the repertory with fantasias of operas works and arrangements of piano works by his contemporaries such as Granados and Albéniz for the guitar masterfully, he even went back and did a considerable amount of arrangements by well known composers.

Tárrega's repertoire of guitar music written by guitarists did not include music of the Renaissance or Baroque periods. Rather, it began with the late eighteenth century and music by Sor... Tárrega's solution to the guitar's relatively undistinguished repertoire was to transcribe works by the great masters from Bach onwards, including Beethoven, Chopin, and Schumann<sup>10</sup>.

Tárrega, an already skilled pianist, had a uniquely easy time arranging these works for the guitar since he already knew how to play them on piano. Also, the massive amount of transcriptions that Tárrega has done was probably in reflection of Arcas, as he was also known for doing transcriptions for guitar but not to Tárrega's extent. This choice to avoid repertory from those Eras in time echo to today's guitarist who rarely perform anything before the Romantic Era, although since Tárrega did start the first Golden Age of guitar, imitation is an important part of going forward.

At this point in the Romantic Era, popular repertory for the classical guitar is scarce and besides retrofitted arrangements of guitar-like ancestors for the instrument, not many composers dared write for it. There are two solutions for this problem. The obvious being to write more music, which Tárrega did, but he also did the second solution and arranged popular and established pieces for the guitar. The works of Tárrega comes down to 78 original works, and 140 arrangements that go between solo guitar and two guitars; although not all of his works were published so this is

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10 Walter Clark, "Francisco Tárrega, Isaac Albéniz, and the Modern Guitar," *Soundboard* 36 (2010): 4.

subject to change<sup>11</sup>. His most famous works are established amongst today's guitarists as the staple of Spanish classical guitar music; most notably recognized are *Capricho Arabe*, *Danza Mora*, *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, and many of his character pieces and preludes are used frequently in popular repertory. Although these are seen as masterpieces of virtuosity, Tárrega was also interested in writing pieces for teaching purposes (mainly his preludes) which are still used today when teaching the fundamentals of classical guitar. In performance, Tárrega was a top notch performer and his skill in both guitar and piano created multiple circles of friends, admirers, and students of all backgrounds. This fame would last until the time of his death.

### The Modern Classical Guitar

Before Tárrega's famous guitar technique is discussed, it's important to talk about the instrument that helped Tárrega pioneer this new method. The Torres guitar is seen hand in hand in talks about Tárrega's method because Tárrega and Arcas were influencing factors to the creation and success of this new guitar during their lifetimes.

The modern classical guitar started with the innovations done by the famous Spanish luthier, Antonio de Torres Jurado. Torres worked with many musicians over the years all of whom pushed him to build a better guitar for performance. But it was through the advice given by the virtuosic guitarist Arcas, which fueled the inspiration of Torres' first prototype of the guitar<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> "Tárrega, Francisco," Grove Music Online, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27525>.

<sup>12</sup> "LUTHIER: Antonio De Torres," Guitar Salon International, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.guitarsalon.com/articles.php?articleid=18>.

In the era of Romanticism, the demands of an instrument to fulfill both volume and expression were high and the guitar lacked both. In comparison to the piano, which has already received most of its modern-day innovations, the guitar didn't hold a candle in a concert hall. Even in Spain, who still hadn't fully embraced the piano, the guitar was mostly associated with peasants, gypsies, and cheap performers. Tárrega gotten possession of the guitar when a merchant wanted to fund his search for a guitar similar to what Arcas had that would expand Tárrega's playing capacity considerably. According to Tárrega's biography, Pujol describes the encounter with Torres:

Torres, a player of recognized ability and good musical taste in addition to being a builder, realized right away he had an exceptional guitarist in front of him. His surprise and admiration kept growing until he said to Tárrega - Wait, that's not the guitar for you. He disappeared into the back room of the shop and returned in a few seconds with a beautiful instrument he had built for his own personal use, with all his love as an artist. And placing it in Tárrega's hands, he told him - This is the guitar you deserve<sup>13</sup>.

Torres fundamentally increased the body of the guitar, in comparison to the guitar of Aguado's time it's about twenty percent bigger; where the increase is seen is in both the upper and lower bouts of the guitar body. Torres also added a separate saddle on the bridge of the guitar to allow last minute string adjustments and increased the width of the neck. Finally, although it's not a new form of technology during Torres' time, he added the use of mechanical head gears in the tuning pegs for better sustained tuning<sup>14</sup>.

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13 Adrián Rius Espiños, "Francisco Tárrega, 1852-1909: Biography (Valencia: Editorial de Música S.A.,2006), 31.

14 "LUTHIER: Antonio De Torres," Guitar Salon International, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.guitarsalon.com/articles.php?articleid=18>.

The place of the guitar, especially in Spain, was a form of musical entertainment as well as decoration; Torres made a push that guitars intended for serious music has only subtle decoration and although Torres himself has made guitars of similar stature, it was kept away from the functional parts of the instrument. Although Torres has made significant improvements to the guitar that will echo even in today's guitar designs he still died in a poor financial state, but Torres is still considered by many as the most important classical guitar maker in the world.

### The Tárrega School

Although it's still unclear of whether the "Tárrega School" truly existed since Tárrega never got to solidify his pedagogical findings in writing. As stated by Fernando Espi,

...we know that Tárrega compiled a series of studies for a method, although was not able to publish it. Also Tárrega prepared some manuscripts with a set of studies adapted to the necessities of his students which are clear examples of method. One of the characteristics of these studies is the serious conception to solve all technical problems (scales, arpeggios, slurs, barres...), they are centered in the mechanical work of both hands and rejecting the musical discourse in favour of a purely technical one<sup>15</sup>.

Regardless of what wasn't published, Tárrega's teachings are carried by his loyal students such as Emilio Pujol, Miguel Illobet, Roch and others in their own method books and teachings, but with their own interpretations.

Tárrega's method focused on a different method of plucking the string to get a more striking sound to excel in both volume and expression. The school follows four main changes to the method: attacking the strings with fingers of the right hand (what is described as the apoyando stroke), perpendicular hand position for attacking the

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15 *Francisco Tárrega: Guitar Transcriptions*. (Madrid: Verso, 2004), CD-ROM, 15.

strings, the position of the guitar being slightly diagonal, and a curving of the fingers in the both hands<sup>16</sup>.

There are two methods for plucking the strings on the guitar, *apoyando* and *tirando*, or what as we know it in modern guitar technique rest stroke and free stroke; both of these techniques are as old as the instrument itself. Free stroke is a sympathetic motion where the fingers strike the string but do not follow through in the motion and immediately resets to its original position, this method is ideal for arpeggios motions and other uses similar to that. Rest stroke is the notion of following through when striking the string with a finger in the right hand and the finger resting on the string that follows after. This technique allows for a stronger sound since the performer will have to put more force behind the strike. This is also helpful in being more expressing in one's playing since it can highlight melody lines and show contrast in playing against free stroke.

It's been noted that in the time previous to Tárrega, guitarists would mainly focus on the free stroke as their main playing method. This would contribute to the sound of the guitars seemingly less expressive and un-bombastic sound before. With the expansion in the width of the neck and a raised fingerboard on the guitar by Torres, Tárrega abandoned Aguado's method of resting the pinky finger on the soundboard to use free stroke and utilized the extra room in between strings to firmly place his fingers and make better use of rest stroke.

The changes in right hand technique didn't stop there, as Tárrega switched the usage of the footstool from the right foot to elevate the guitar on the right thigh to

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16 Matanya Ophee, "The Promotion of Francisco Tárrega - A Case History," *Soundboard* vii (1981): 259.

the guitar being on the left thigh and the footstool going under the left foot; this was to deal with the larger and different shape of the guitar body. In doing so, the right hand is now perpendicular to the strings which ease the placement of the right hand fingers on the strings to be more standardized, as well as ease the execution of the two strokes used for striking the strings. Finally in Tárrega's new technique, to maintain a curve in the fingers of both hands when playing, similar to piano hand technique of keeping a loose curve in the fingers, this is probably from Tárrega's formal training as a pianist and the reasoning for the use of this is similar to that of piano technique<sup>17</sup>.

In conclusion, Tárrega's work with the Torres guitar has made rise in the guitars popularity and use to where he had paved the way for the first and second Golden Age of guitar. Although he never lived to see either of those ages come to be he played a key factor at the apex of guitar virtuosity of his time where he is remembered through his innovations in technique and compositions.

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17 Matanya Ophee, "The Promotion of Francisco Tárrega - A Case History," *Soundboard* vii (1981): 259.

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