

Sor and Moretti

“I heard one of (Moretti’s) accompaniments performed by a friend of his, and the progression of the base, as well as the parts of the harmony which I distinguished, gave me a high idea of his merit. I considered him as the flambeau which was to serve to illuminate the wandering steps of guitarists.”
~ Fernando Sor, Method for the Spanish Guitarⁱ

1792 saw the first publication, in Italy, of Federico Moretti’s *Principj per la Chitarra*,ⁱⁱ which provides a very detailed insight into late baroque (five course) guitar technique in a musical style which was already ‘classical’. Left hand fingerings for scales and chords (in various inversions and positions) are followed by useful cadences (I – IV – V – I) in all keys, showing good voice leading, the use of the diminished chord in minor cadences, etc, and finally sixty right-hand fingerings for a C Major chord arpeggio, anticipating Giuliani’s 120 arpeggio studies by some twenty years.

The edition was a success, and a Spanish translation with adaptations for the six-course (double strung) instrument – the guitar generally played in Spain at that time – was published in 1799, when Sor was 21-years of age. At such an age, Sor had probably already developed his harmonic understanding and technical skills to a level beyond most of his guitar colleagues. Despite that, there are many interesting connections between the two men that point to a shared practice, one which might have been fairly common, at least in the former Spanish colony of Naples (where Moretti’s original book had been published) and in Spain.

There is no evidence of the use of the right hand annular finger in Moretti’s book. In fact, he seems to go out of his way to avoid using the finger, and one can only conclude that he did not use it at all. Consider the following arpeggio studies:

n. 24



Here, the middle finger plays both the second and first strings, where one might reasonably expect the annular finger to come in to play (prima). This is no printing error, as there are other similar examples:

n. 47



Here, the middle finger actually plays the first string followed by the second string, with a light rest stroke. This is followed with a similar movement in the thumb. One can't imagine Giuliani or Aguado employing this technique.

The index finger also engages in this cross-string activity:

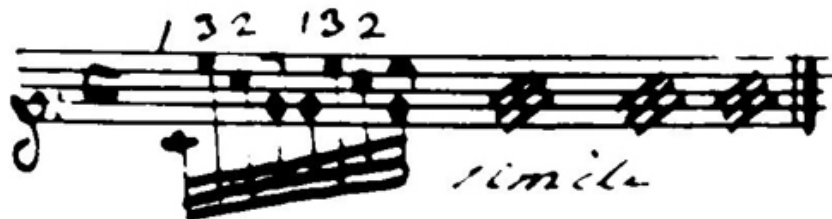
n. 37



The thumb crosses three strings, the middle finger plays the first string, then the index finger crosses from second to third strings.

And finally:

n. 50



Again, the second finger crosses over both second and third strings.

The modern classical guitarist might disdain such practice as being cumbersome, but one has to remember two things: 1) this tutor was very popular, and 2) the technique produces an audio effect which Moretti (and presumably others) found attractive. As we shall see shortly, it is a technique which goes some way to illuminating the problems Fernando Sor evidently had with his employment of the annular finger.

Moretti's book also illustrates I - IV - V - I cadences in all keys. Why should he do this? The IV - V - I or ii - V - I cadence is the foundation stone of Classical period harmonic practice, and it is therefore essential for any budding composer or improviser to know it thoroughly on his instrument. Many guitar commentators (none more than Fernando Sor) were at pains to demonstrate that the guitar could perform passages with 'correct' harmonic movement. Moretti shows ways of forming chords with good voice leading, with the seventh of a Dominant 7th chord falling gracefully to the third of a Tonic Major chord, for example. It is this practice Sor is referring to in the quotation at the start of this essay.

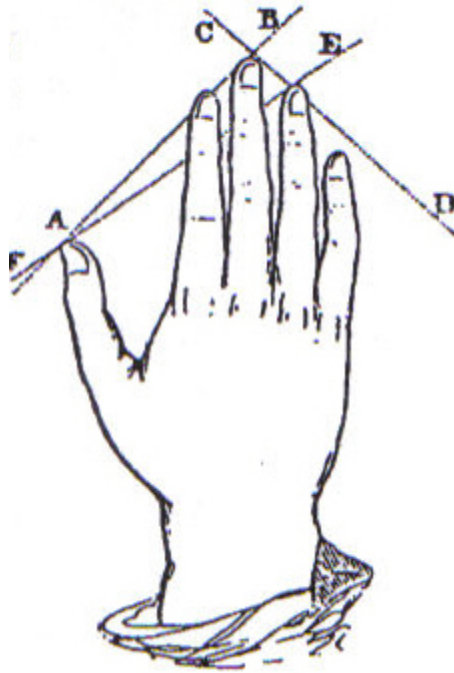
Fernando Sor's *Method for the Spanish Guitar* was published almost forty years after Moretti's *Principj per la Chitarra*, when the Spaniard was in his early 50s, and is the culmination of many years of composing and performing. He mentions Moretti as early as the *Introduction*, a possible indication of the importance the latter held for him.

Sor makes a few comments about his use of the annular finger, for example:

'...I rarely use the third finger of the right hand for harmony,
I forbid it entirely for melody.'

Sor's reasoning (and every movement for Sor had to be justified), stems from his observations on the physiognomy of the plucking hand:

Fig. 10. Right hand.



Using his annular finger would 'place my hand in a constrained position' and was therefore of limited value.

'I therefore establish as a rule of my fingering, for the right hand, to employ commonly only the three fingers touched by the line AB, and to use the fourth only for playing a chord in four parts.'

But what of four-note chords where the top note forms part of the melody? Here Sor admits he must part from his rules:

'In this place I should remark that, in a succession of chords, the upper part of which forms a melody which ought to predominate, as the finger, which is to produce it, is weaker than the others, I curve it more in the act of touching the string...I have therefore found it necessary to make it acquire by its curvature the power refused to it by nature, as well from the construction of the bones of the hand as from the derivation of the nerves by which they are actuated'

Clearly, Sor is having trouble uniting his practice with his theory. He seems to have inherited a technique similar to that of Moretti, but has been compelled, due to the particular harmonic and melodic nature of his own compositions, to utilise a weak finger on strong and melodically important beats.

Because of his unwillingness to use the ring finger unless he had no alternative, Sor used his thumb over four strings, saving his index and middle for the second and first strings. In certain passages these two fingers could move to the third and second strings. He rarely used both fingers on one string:

‘Sometimes I thus employ them, but never on other strings than the first, and, very rarely, the second; and never but for a single repetition, and on unaccented times of the measure, reserving the thumb for the accented notes.’

In other words, because of his desire to move his right hand as little as possible, and to avoid alternating the index and middle fingers on any string other than the first (rarely, the second) he employs either slurs or brings his thumb into play on accented notes. His illustrations show that he is happy for the thumb to move as far as the first string.

Sor was a man of the Enlightenmentⁱⁱⁱ whose last words on learning the guitar were ‘To hold reasoning for a great deal, and routine for nothing’. Although his reasoning might sometimes leave the modern reader with raised eyebrow, the fact remains that *this is the way he played*. It is therefore of great importance to modern ‘period’ performers to study his technique in detail, should they attempt to play his works. The deeper we journey into the early 19th-century guitar, the more we realise that Sor, Giuliani and Aguado (to name but three) each had a radically different technique, and that they composed their works *with* that technique; and that if we are to get close to recreating the sound of their music, then we too must employ their techniques.

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ⁱ 1832 English Translation by A. Merrick, Tecla Editions, 1995

ⁱⁱ [Principj per la Chitarra] Federico Moretti, SPES Editions, Firenze, 1983

ⁱⁱⁱ See Brian Jeffrey’s online article, *Sor, Teaching, and the Enlightenment*
<http://www.tecla.com/authors/sorteacher.htm>