# SOR'S ALLEGRO IN THE SPANISH STYLE, NATALIE HOUZÉ, AND KEY DATES IN EUROPEAN CULTURAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

*By Brian Jeffery*

This article is about Sor's Allegro "dans le genre espagnol" ("in the Spanish style"), which is the last movement in his guitar duet *Fantaisie*, op. 54 bis.[1] It contains rhythms that appear to be Andalusian, with plenty of hemiola and even with rasgueado notated, and in using that idiom it is unique in Sor's music for solo guitar or guitar duet. The work was first published in Paris in about 1833, probably performed there in a concert in February 1832 as we shall see, and therefore probably composed in 1831. The question is: why did it appear at that particular moment? I would like to suggest that it may have something to do with the date.

## The music and its performance

Let's first look at the music. **Figure 1** shows the beginning of that Allegro "in the Spanish style."

Sor states on the title-page of this *Fantaisie*, op. 54 bis, that the work was "composée expressément pour Mlle Houzé" ("composed expressly for Mlle Houzé"), and Sor and his pupil Natalie Houzé (**Figure 2**) gave a joint concert in Paris on February 29, 1832, in which it seems likely that they played this piece.

A reviewer of that concert in the newspaper *La France nouvelle* of the next day, March 1, 1832, wrote:

> M. Sor a donné hier, dans les salons de M. Dietz, un concert qui avait attiré plusieurs amateurs. On a entendu avec plaisir Mlle Houzé, élève de ce célèbre guitariste. Le jeu pur et le doigté élégant de cette jeune personne témoignent en faveur de l'excellente méthode de son maître. On a dit jusqu'à présent que M. Sor n'écrivait que pour lui, mais Mlle Houzé a donné une preuve du contraire. Dans les deux duos exécutés

Figure 2: Natalie Houzé.
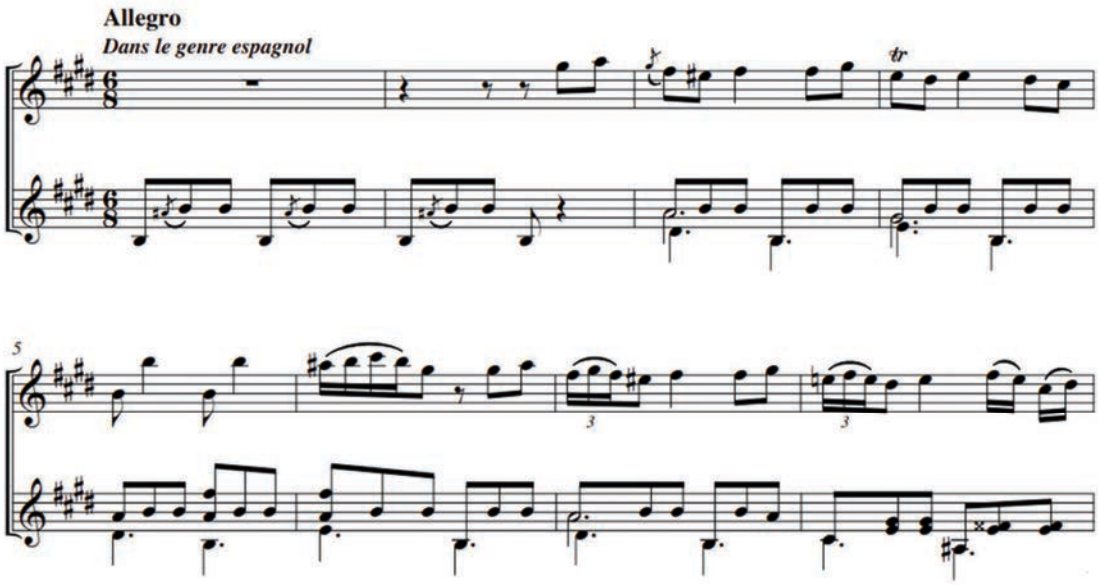
Figure 1: Beginning of the movement Allegro "in the Spanish style."
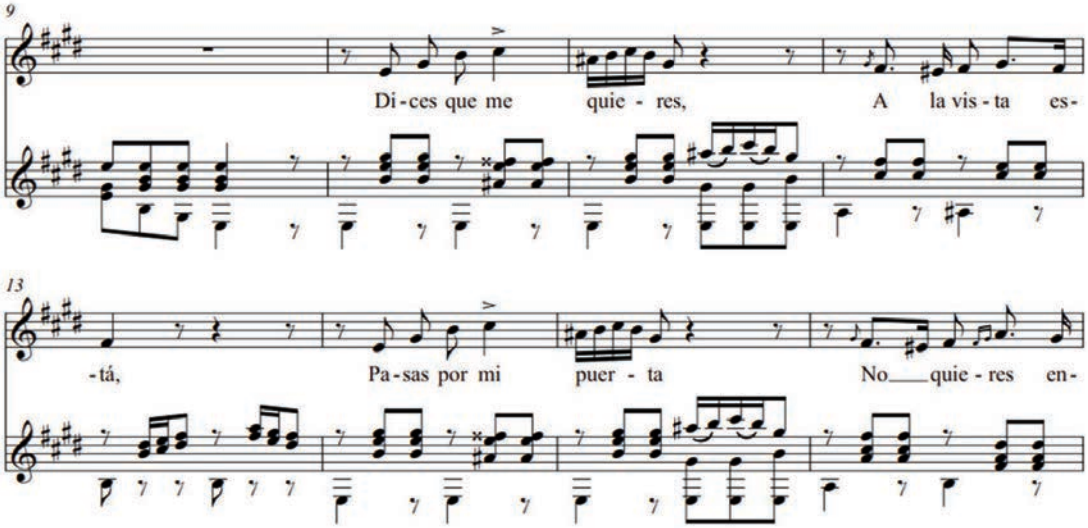
Figure 3: "Las quejas de Maruja," mm. 9–16.

par elle et son professeur, Mlle Houzé s'est montrée aussi bonne musicienne que brillante exécutante, et les auditeurs ont pu se convaincre que la musique de M. Sor était remplie de charme.

(M. Sor gave a concert yesterday in the salons of M. Dietz which attracted the presence of a good many lovers of music. It was with pleasure that Mlle Houzé was heard, who is a pupil of this famous guitarist. The pure playing and the elegant fingering of this young person testified in favor of the excellent method of her teacher. Until now people have said that M. Sor only writes for himself, but Mlle Houzé has proved that that is not so. In the two duets played by her and her teacher, Mlle Houzé showed herself to be as good a musician as she is a brilliant player, and the audience could be convinced that M. Sor's music is full of charm.)[2]

Did they play this *Fantaisie*, op. 54 bis, in that particular concert? The reviewer does not say which pieces they played, but merely mentions "les deux duos exécutés par elle et son professeur" ("the two duos played by her and her teacher"). But it would surely be a waste of such a fine piece as this *Fantaisie*, which was composed expressly for Natalie Houzé, who was playing in the concert, not to play it. So it seems likely that they performed the piece in that concert of February 29, 1832. That means that Sor would surely have composed it already in 1831 or very early 1832, to give time for preparation for the concert in February 1832. Apart from the *Fantaisie*, op. 54 bis, there is one other known guitar duet that Sor dedicated to Natalie Houzé, the *Six Valses … par différents auteurs*, op. 39, and perhaps they played some items from that.[3]

The date of the concert and the date of probable composition of the piece are special. For one thing, we all know that February 29 only comes round once every four years! But quite apart from that, those dates for the concert and probable composition of the piece are special because of the earthshaking political and cultural events that had taken place in Paris just a few months earlier, in 1830, and I shall explore what possible connections there may be between this piece and those events.

## The Spanish idiom

First, let's look at Sor's use of this musical idiom. Once was in the song "Las quejas de Maruja," which may date from 1837 or shortly before but may well have roots from the time when Sor lived in Andalucia, that is to say, in 1813 or earlier. In the song a girl complains that her boyfriend doesn't give her enough attention. An advertisement from Spain calls it a "canción andaluza." Sor lived for some nine years in Málaga with frequent visits to Seville, and he may well have adapted music that he heard there to make this song. **Figure 3** shows where the voice enters after the introduction.

Another time that Sor used this idiom was in "Should a pretty Spanish lass" from the "Operatick Drama" *Gil Blas*, put on in London in 1822, just before Sor left that city for Paris the same year. *Gil Blas* was adapted from the well-known picaresque eighteenth-century novel *Gil Blas* by Alain-René Lesage, which is set in Spain, and surely the reason why Sor, a Spaniard, was invited to write songs for it. **Figure 4** (next page) shows, again, where the voice enters after the introduction.

However, there is no sign of these Spanish rhythms in any of Sor's music for solo guitar or for guitar duet until we arrive at op. 54 bis. So how is it that he came to write this particular piece at this particular time?
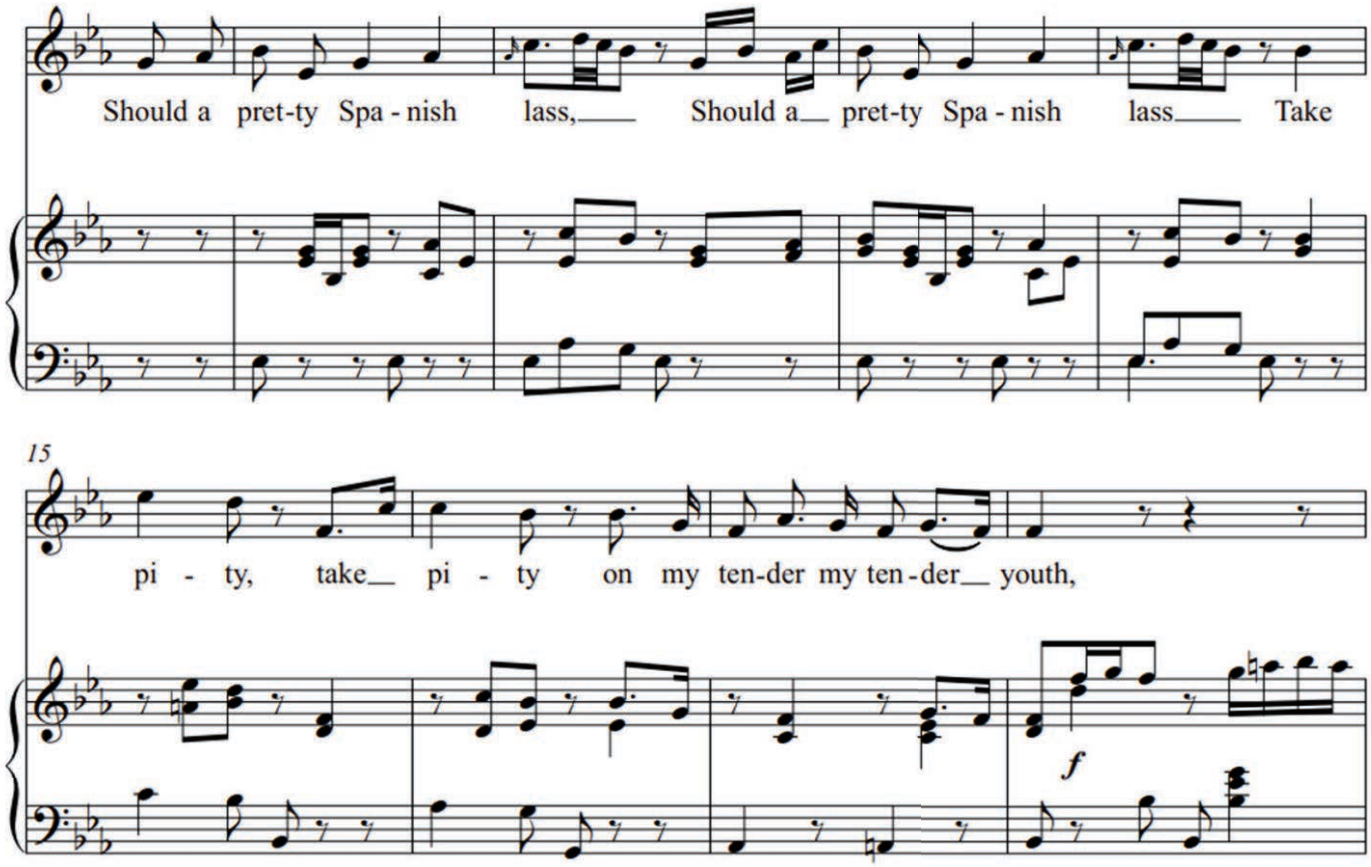
Figure 4: "Should a pretty Spanish lass," mm. 11–18.[4]

Let's look at three aspects that underwent huge changes in France specifically in 1830, just before Sor's piece appeared: culture, politics, and attitude to Spain.

## Culture

Culture exploded first, with the play *Hernani* by Victor Hugo, which premiered in Paris on February 25, 1830. That premiere turned into the famous Bataille d'Hernani, in which partisans of the new type of theater almost literally fought in the actual theater against partisans of the old. The partisans of the new were mostly young people, which is important when we come shortly to look at the part that the young Natalie Houzé may possibly have played in the creation of our piece. Hugo himself was only twenty-eight when *Hernani* premiered.

What exactly was new in *Hernani*? To answer that, we will do well to look back to October 1827, when Hugo published the preface to his play *Cromwell*, a preface which served as a manifesto for his ideas and his intentions at that point in time. It is a long text, but essentially he wished to free drama from the restrictions that it had previously observed and instead mix genres such as tragedy and comedy in the same play, and to freely include the grotesque.

The play and the famous battle in the theater gave strong impetus to the movement we call romanticism. So when we think of the composition of our piece, we might think of it within the context of the romantic movement. One wonders whether Sor or Natalie Houzé did as well.

*Hernani* is set in Spain, and indeed its full title is *Hernani ou l'honneur castellane* (Hernani or Castilian honor). Hugo wrote in the preface to *Hernani*, when that play was published after its premiere in March 1830, that if anyone wanted to know the source of the play, they would do well to look at the *Romancero general* and at the plays of Corneille and Molière. (*Romancero general* is a collection of Spanish romances first published in the sixteenth century and then translated into French by none other than Victor Hugo's brother Abel Hugo, a translation which appeared in print in France in 1822.) But we should be very careful to note that Hugo does not merely copy any of those models. Instead, he creates a whole new poetic world in which Spain has a whole new romantic image created by Hugo, and it was that new poetic and romantic image of Spain that the public henceforth would have known.

## Politics

Culture was already tightly bound up with politics in the events of 1830, for when *Hernani* reached print in March of the year, Hugo wrote in its preface that "Le romantisme, tant de fois mal défini, n'est, à tout prendre, et c'est là sa définition réelle, que le libéralisme en littérature" ("Romanticism, which is so often badly defined, is in reality—and this is its true definition—liberalism expressed in literature").

What exactly was liberalism then? Perhaps we can best briefly see it as Sor experienced it, since we are looking at a piece by Sor. To go back to the year 1808: the absolute monarchs of Spain at that time willingly handed the monarchy over to the new constitutional monarchy of Joseph Bonaparte, renouncing all their rights. (I know that that is not the conventional story, but it is what actually happened. You will find chapter and verse in my book *España de la guerra*, pages 24–33.) Unfortunately, the absolutists went to war and won with the aid of Great Britain and Lord Wellington, and an absolute monarch, Fernando VII, was put in place, abolishing not only the constitution under which Joseph had ruled but also the constitution that the liberals in Cadiz had constructed—and Sor had to go into exile for very many years. Then in 1820, the uprising of Rafael de Riego succeeded, and the constitution was restored. For three years, which we call the Trienio, there was peace in Spain and what we might call liberalism. But in 1823 the absolutists won again, Riego was hanged, and—this being important for Sor in France—the reactionary and absolutist king of France, Bourbon king Louis XVIII, actually sent an army under the Duc d'Angoulême to Spain to assist Fernando VII in his repression of anything liberal.

Then things changed. The very next year, 1824, Louis XVIII died and was succeeded by Charles X, who was also reactionary and absolutist. Things came to a head, and in 1830 the July Revolution occurred, when enormous crowds demonstrated in Paris, the streets of the city were barricaded, Charles X abdicated, and a new monarch, Louis Philippe, became king of France, ruling under a constitutional charter. It was progress toward liberalism.

Sor, with his liberal ideas, living in Paris, would certainly have known all this. And it was precisely at this time, surely not by coincidence, that he wrote his two "liberal" songs, "Le dernier cri des Grecs" in 1829, in favor of freedom for Greece from the oppression of the Turks, and "Appel des nègres aux français" in probably 1832, in favor of the liberation of slaves.

## Spain

And finally, Spain. First, let's see how Spain was regarded in France in 1830, because the view of Spain in France at that moment may have had something to do with our op. 54 bis.

Back in the years 1808 to 1814, very many Frenchmen had served in Spain in what in France is often called La guerre d'Espagne, in England the Peninsular War, and in Spain the Guerra de la Independencia. Many of them wrote memoirs, and we can read about the Spain of those days as a primitive land with a great deal of hardship (at least, probably for those who were not of the highest rank). So if you had asked someone in France in the 1810s or even 1820s about Spain, that is the view that you were likely to get.

But now, in 1830, those memories had somewhat faded. Now, *Hernani* became known to everyone cultured in Paris—it is set in Spain and it is romantic. So after February 1830, when *Hernani* was performed, if you had asked anyone cultured in Paris about Spain, they might well have replied no longer in terms of hardship but in terms of the romantic play *Hernani*. It may very well be that our piece, our Allegro, might have been composed with something of that romantic view of Spain in mind.

So with those pieces of background in mind, let's look again at Natalie Houzé. Under the picture of her (**Figure 2**) were the words "Madelle N.H. L'Elève la plus forte de Mr F Mo" ("Miss N.H. The most accomplished pupil of Mr. Francesco Molino"). "N.H." must surely be Natalie Houzé. So at one time, in the 1820s, she was the pupil of Francesco Molino, and then slightly later, and certainly by about 1829, when Sor's op. 39 that is dedicated to her was published, she was the pupil of Sor. It is even possible that she remained the pupil of both, but that we do not know.

I am told by experts in French historical dress that what Mlle Houzé is wearing in the picture shows that she is of a very high social level. She is also very Christian, as we can see from the cross in her necklace. And she is young: the reviewer in 1832 writes about "cette jeune personne." She must have been talented indeed if she could perform this *Fantaisie* to the acclaim of reviewers. She would certainly have had other studies and the claims of society, as Sor tells us in the Introduction to his *Method* when writing about another young lady pupil, so she must necessarily have met very many cultured people. So I think there is no doubt at all that she would have known all about *Hernani* and all about the politics of the time including liberalism.

Nor is it necessarily the case that someone from the higher ranks of society would be against the new ideas: after all, Victor Hugo was himself the son of a general. So one

wonders whether it was Houzé, in those days of 1831, who had the idea that her teacher Sor might compose a Spanish piece, seen now in the romantic light of *Hernani*, and whether she suggested that she herself might perform it with him. She may certainly have known Sor's "liberal" song "Le dernier cri des grecs" of 1829 and have applauded its sentiments. For whatever reason, if she did ask him to compose a Spanish piece, Sor agreed. As we saw, he wrote in the published edition of this *Fantaisie* the words "composée expressément pour Mlle Houzé" ("composed expressly for Mlle Houzé"), which is an unusual phrase. The usual phrase in many works of Sor was "composé et dédié à [someone]," but the words "composée expressément" are exceptional, indeed they are unique in Sor's works. What exactly do these words mean? Do they mean "composed for her to suit her talents"? Do they mean "composed for her as a pretty piece"? Do they mean "composed at her request as what we would call a 'folkloric' piece"? Or, I wonder, do they mean "composed expressly at the wish of Mlle Houzé" for reasons that have to do with the culture of those precise days, with liberalism, or with the changed view of Spain since *Hernani*?

Alas, we cannot ask her (or Sor). But what I think we can say is that all those things that were new in France in 1830 were very much in the air in 1831, so it may be that in the process of composing this work, in whatever way, some of these things may have had an influence. It isn't really a hypothesis of mine, just a conjecture, but it would not surprise me if it were this young woman of remarkable talent who had the political or cultural awareness to suggest to Sor that he compose the piece, for whatever reasons, and that he and she might play it in a joint concert.

The probability increases when we realize that this Allegro is unique in Sor's works in two ways, not just one: it is his only piece for guitar or guitar solo to have this Andalusian rhythm, and it is the only one to have that specific wording "composée expressément" (in this case for Mlle Houzé). Put the two unique aspects together and the likelihood that she suggested it increases.

For what reasons might Sor have composed it or Natalie Houzé requested it? Certainly with the new view of Spain in mind. Possibly with an idea of romanticism in mind. And as for liberalism, well, the music is obviously popular in style, which may have appealed to her. Also, Sor might have had a possible future liberation of Spain in mind at that time, a wish that was to be partly fulfilled in the very next year 1833, when Fernando VII died and liberal ideas again had a chance—when for example General Quiroga, who had been Riego's right-hand man, and had gone into exile, returned to Spain, rose to high rank, and to whom in or shortly before 1837 Sor dedicated his *Marche pour la musique militaire*, a splendid triumphal march that we may imagine to have celebrated the dawning of a new more liberal age in Spain. We have a score of this march for piano four hands, but from the title's words *pour la musique militaire*, we may imagine that it was originally intended for military band.

When Natalie Houzé took lessons from Sor, it would surely have been at his flat in the Marché St Honoré (see my book *Fernando Sor: Composer and Guitarist*). There she would surely have met another young and cultured lady, namely Sor's daughter Caroline, who in February 1832 was age sixteen. From recent discoveries set out in my book, we now know that Caroline took part in high-society theater performances in 1836 and 1837, so she was definitely a person of culture. And we know from Sor's *Method* and from the text about Sor in Ledhuy's *Encyclopédie* that Sor himself was well-read. So we have two cultured young ladies and an erudite composer who actively composed "liberal" songs.

Moreover, the picture of Natalie Houzé shows her in a room with many books. How many pictures of guitarists exist from that period that show books? Very few, if indeed any. Natalie herself must surely have requested that she be painted or drawn with books, or the artist might have suggested it. Either way, the picture deliberately shows us that this is a lady to whom books were familiar, and also that her social position was one in which books were normal. Caroline, too, pursued an activity that could not have been more literary, by acting in plays, even though we know from the account of Eusebio Font y Moreso (in my book) that she also played harp and painted. These were all actively cultured and indeed literary people. It is difficult to see how there would not have been a connection from current liberal and cultural thinking to our Allegro.

There is more to say about this Allegro. We saw that a source of "Las quejas de Maruja" described it as a "canción andaluza," so this particular idiom can be seen to be Andalusian. It was part of a popular culture. So when Sor came to compose this Allegro in a popular style as one movement of an otherwise classical piece, he was doing the same thing that other composers of the time did. A famous example is the tarantella which forms the fourth movement of Schubert's quartet *Death and the Maiden* of 1824. Other examples are seen in some Divertimientos of Pedro Ximénez, published recently by Tecla, where this South American composer, living in what is now Bolivia, inserted local dances, the *bailecito* and the *yaraví*, into what were otherwise classical pieces (on www.tecla.com, search Ximénez).

Hugo wrote in that same preface to *Hernani*: "Cette voix haute et puissante du peuple, qui ressemble à celle de Dieu,

veut désormais que la poésie ait la même devise que la politique: tolérance et liberté" ("This lofty and powerful voice of the people, which resembles the voice of God, desires from now on that poetry shall have the same object as politics: tolerance and liberty"). So the voice of the people may lie behind our Allegro. The piece is, after all, based on Andalusian popular music and therefore can be described as "of the people."

Against the idea that there was a connection between Sor's *Fantaisie* and the events of 1830, one might say that no, it was just Sor including a Spanish dance as other composers did with other dances, with no further ado. But Sor was a thinking man and actively a composer of liberal songs, and Natalie Houzé and Caroline Sor were exceptional young ladies, both of them with literary connections and literary activity, and I find it hard to imagine that none of them made the link.

In any case, it seems to me that this Allegro is a major composition and needs to be seen as such in the general history of music, not only of guitar. It was by someone who was by far the most important Spanish player of the Spanish national instrument in Paris at the exact time that a change happened there in the way that Spain was perceived after *Hernani*, and it is part of Spanish popular culture, preserved for us by a composer with liberal sympathies. The music, popular in style, can be seen as a step in expressing the voice of the people in music.

## Conclusion

So there you have it. Try it yourself if you like—that Allegro movement has splendid rhythms, and the other movements are excellent in their way. Sor's first published guitar duet, *L'Encouragement*, has the word *L'élève* as a heading on each page of Guitar 1; and in Guitar 2 it has *Le maître*. So was Natalie Houzé the pupil who played all the top part and Sor the teacher who played all the lower part? The second guitar part has great interest.

Sor presented Natalie Houzé in another concert in about February 1838, as a Paris newspaper of that time wrote:

> Pour terminer, je vous dirai deux mots d'une petite soirée musicale qui a eu lieu récemment dans le but de faire entendre les nouvelles guitares de M. Laprévotte. On connaît les progrès qu'a fait faire à cet instrument l'artiste que nous venons de nommer. Outre l'immense supériorité de ces guitares sur toutes les autres, que l'on a été à même de constater, on n'a pu s'empêcher d'admirer le talent vraiment distingué d'une jeune et jolie personne, Mlle Nathalie [sic] H…, qui a exécuté plusieurs morceaux de M. Sor avec une perfection merveilleuse. Espérons que Mlle Nathalie H… ne s'en tiendra pas là, et qu'elle ne laissera pas vieillir dans le cercle trop modeste des auditoires d'amateurs, un talent fait pour briller au grand jour et s'élever encore au bruit des applaudissements des artistes et d'un public éclairé.[5]
>
> (To finish, I will say a few words about a modest musical evening which took place recently with the purpose of letting the new guitars of M. Laprévotte be heard. The progress in this instrument that this artist has achieved is already known. Besides the immense superiority of these guitars over all others, as one was enabled to perceive, one could not help admiring the truly distinguished talent of a young and pretty person, Mlle Nathalie H…, who played several compositions of M. Sor with marvellous perfection. Let us hope that Mlle Nathalie H… will not leave it at that and that she will not let her talent grow old in the too modest surroundings of amateur enthusiasts, a talent made to shine in the broad light of day and to rise to greater heights to the sound of the applause of artists and of an enlightened public.)

Alas, it seems that Natalie Houzé did not go on to let her talent shine in the broad light of day. And also alas, evidently this reviewer did not know about the concert in which she played in February 1832.

Finally, it was not only Sor who roused himself to compose Spanish "popular" music at this time in Paris. Aguado did the same with his *Variations on the Fandango* and the *Menuet affandangado*, which date from about 1835 or 1836. You can hear Aguado's *Variations on the Fandango* on YouTube (search "Aguado Fandango") played splendidly by Petrit Çeku. You can get the score of Aguado's Fandango as a separate piece, re-engraved, from Tecla in printed or digital, on www.tecla.com; go to "Aguado" and then "Fandango."

Brian Jeffery goes back a long way with the GFA, being almost (not quite) a founder member. In 2012 he was admitted to GFA's Hall of Fame as a recipient of that year's Artistic Achievement Award. Jeffery taught French Renaissance at St. Andrews and UC Berkeley, and played lute and guitar in many concerts. Then he published *Fernando Sor: Composer and Guitarist* and the complete guitar works by Sor, which people said at the time they didn't even know existed. Now he runs Tecla Editions (www.tecla.com) and is thinking about taking up the lute again.

## Endnotes

[1] Sor's *Fantaisie*, op. 54 bis, is in vol. 9 of my edition of the *New Complete Works for Guitar* of Sor, and also available separately and in digital at www.tecla.com. There are performances of the piece by Julian Bream and John Williams, and by Claudio Maccari and Paolo Pugliese, on YouTube.

[2] I am grateful to Patrik Kleemola for telling me about this review.

[3] Sor's *Six valses*, op. 39, are available in vol. 8 of the Tecla *New Complete Works for Guitar* of Sor or as a separate item in digital at www.tecla.com, and you can hear a very good performance of them on YouTube played by Anna Tasiemska and Jens Wagner.

[4] Scores of "Las quejas de Maruja" and "Should a pretty Spanish lass" are available in digital at www.tecla.com. There is a good recording of "Las quejas de Maruja" on YouTube nicely sung by Shudong Braamse in which the pianist makes a delightful job of the piano accompaniment.

[5] *L'Indépendant, Furet de Paris*, March 4, 1838; cited by Josep Maria Mangado in *Fernando Sor (1778–1839)*, vol. 3, *La actividad guitarrística en París (1825–1839)* (Sant Feliu de Llobregat, Barcelona: Self-published; Tecla, 2010), 650.

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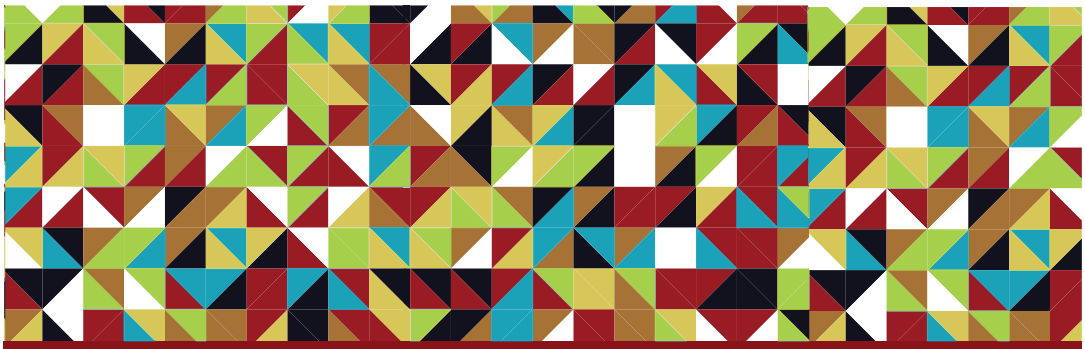

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