

## The dilemma of timbre on the guitar

*"No subject has called for such a wealth of  
definitions as have undefinable things".*

BECQUER.

*Scientific definition of sound. Timbre in sonority. Differences of timbre in every instrument. Factors affecting appreciation of sound. Tendencies that determine its classification. Dilemma of timbre on the guitar.*

The studious musician, anxious to discover the innermost secret of his art, would seek in vain a satisfactory definition of sound in scientific books. His search would end in disappointment before the bewildering array of words and figures meant to explain a thing which the spirit only can penetrate.

These books tell us, in a high-sounding, scholarly manner, that sound is something produced by the vibrations of a body in anelastic medium through which it is propagated in sonorous waves, and that its timbre or quality, intensity, volume and number of vibrations are extremely variable.

Evidently, all this must be correct, as far as it goes, but it is incomplete. There is something more than this, something of

wich our conscious sensibility is aware, which does not appear in those scientific, lengthy and dry definitions. Something whose nature varies exceedingly, embracing the most trifling as well as the most transcendental aspect of our mind. Something which the mind of man can transform into an immaterial world of wonder and fancy, a world capable of enlivening and comforting the spirit as sunshine can comfort the body.

The faculty of hearing which is natural to us, is subjet to as much diversity as is the physical or moral nature of the hearer. To listen is to concentrate all sensibility in our hearing power, a sensibility which is different in every individual according to his temperament, experience and powers of discernment.

The hearer perceives, simultaneously with the sound, its particular timbre (the colour of sound, as HELMHOLTZ termed it) and experiences it, with its pitch, intensity and duration as a single impact.

Timbre is, in fact, the characteristic element of every sound; and just as colour is to an object, scent to a flower, form to the body, so is timbre to sound.

When we consider, separately, the importance of each instrumental group as a unit in an orchestra, together with the particular quality of each type of instrument, we find that each of these groups represents a definite element, made up of all the tonal individualities of each instrument.

Now, no instrumental group of an orchestra can yield such a variety of timbre as do the plucked instruments, on account of their diversity in shape and size, the thickness, type and quality of their strings, and the different methods employed to make them vibrate.

Timbre may be considered good or bad, better or worse in proportion to the higher or lower value set upon it by each

individual critic. The pronouncement of the critic may be affected by innumerable causes, such as his auditive and emotional sensitiveness, impressionability, musical and intellectual education, force of habit, prejudice, tradition and environment; thus classification of sound varies exceedingly.

We have, however, within limits, a prevailing classification which may be considered a reliable guide: the result of the principles of aesthetics gradually evolved, carefully sifted, and finally established by the most exacting scholars in the best schools and the most eminent interpreters and craftsmen.

The conscious application of these principles led to the universal and lasting recognition of the voices of famous singers such as GRASSINI, Jenny LYND, Adelina PATTI, MELBA, GAYARRE, CARUSO, CHALIAPIN, etc. The same spirit has firmly established the superiority of STRADIVARI, AMATI, and GUARNERI, in bowed instruments; similarly, pianos made by BLUTHNER, BECHSTEIN, PLEYEL, ERARD and STEINWAY have been given first rank, and guitars by PAGÉS, BENEDIT, RECIO, ALTAMIRA and TORRES. Similar principles guide an artist in the quality of tone that he seeks to produce.

Of the known instruments, surely none has offered greater material for controversy than the guitar. This is chiefly on account of the possibility of plucking the strings in two distinct ways: either with the nails or with the fleshy part of the finger tip.

The sound differs according to the technique used and as it is not practicable for the same set of fingers to use two techniques, the player must make a choice: hence the dilemma.

*Preferences of timbre among the Ancients.  
The lutenists of the 17th Century. Dilemma of  
style of playing among guitarists of the 18th  
Century. SOR's and AGUADO's theories. Probable  
determining causes.*

From the most ancient times to the present day the dilemma of sound has been the cause of impassioned controversy. To the guitarist the question of sound is as important as an article of faith to a moralist. It is interesting to note that the aesthetic sentiment — intuitive, almost in every case — inherent in every partisan of a particular timbre, reveals, to a great extent his own personality. For, whatever choice is made, it implies a diverging mental stand-point leading sometimes to diametrically opposed conclusions.

Among the ancient Greeks, two distinct styles of striking the strings were favoured, some players using the fingers, others a plectrum.

In "Apothegmi Laconici", PLUTARCH relates that once, in Sparta, a citharist was punished for plucking the strings with his fingers, and not with a plectrum, during the celebration of a ritual ceremony in a temple. And yet, he adds, the strings plucked with the fingers produce a much sweeter and pleasanter sound than the plectrum.

ATHANAEUS, 300 B. C., referring to EPIGNUS, says, "He was one of the great masters of music; he plucked the strings with his fingers, not with a plectrum".

ARISTOGENES and ANACREON also considered the sound of strings plucked with the fingers better than that produced by the plectrum.

Some players used either style, according to the character of the music they had to interpret. TIBULLUS in one of his elegies,

(Book III, Elegy 4, v. 39), has a passage which, freely translated, says: "And accompanying his own voice on the cithara, and striking the strings with an ivory plectrum, he sang a merry melody in a loud ringing voice; but after this, plucking the strings softly with his fingers, he sang these sad words..." Finally, VIRGIL, in the Aeneid, says, "There they also dance in a ring as they sing a joyful song; the Thracian bard, in his long and loose robes, accompanies their rhythmic song on his seven stringed cithara, now plucking the strings with his fingers, now with a plectrum."

Fortunately, in the Middle Ages, stringed instruments, played either with fingers or bow, were favoured above all others. The Archipreste de Hita qualified as "screamers and shriekers" the stringed instruments with a shrill and harsh tone.

FUENLLANA, in his "Orphenica Lyra" when speaking of *redobles* (1) says: "To strike with the nails is imperfection. Those who *redoblan* with the nails will find facility in what they do but not perfection." Later he adds: "It is a great excellence to strike the string with a stroke which employs neither nail nor other invention. Only the finger, the living thing, can communicate the intention of the spirit."

VINCENZO GALILEI referring in his "Dialogo" to the spinnet, virginals and other instruments with metal strings, declares that they greatly offend the ear, not only because such and such are the strings, but on account of the hard object, similar to a plectrum with which they are set in vibration. He clearly prefers instruments with gut strings such as the guitar, viols

(1) *Redoblar* is the continuous action of plucking alternately with two fingers of the right hand (forefinger-mid or thumb-forefinger). The other way to *redoblar* is with the forefinger only attacking alternately the chord back and forth as one does with the plectrum.

or lute whose sonority is occasioned by direct contact either with the fingers or with the bow (1).

In the Seventeenth Century fretted instruments played by plucking the strings, reached the height of their popularity. The English lutenist, Thomas MACE, in his valuable treatise, "The Music's Monument", describing his technique and that of his illustrious predecessors, John and Robert DOWLAND, ROSSETER, MORLEY, CAVENDISH, COOPER and MAYNARD, (2) finely defends the cause of pure timbre in these words: "...take notice that "you strike not your strings with your nails as some do who "maintain it the best way of play, but I do not; and for this "reason: because the nail cannot draw so sweet a sound from "a lute as the nibble end of the flesh can do. I confess in a "consort, it might do well enough, where the mellow ness " (which is the most excellent satisfaction from a lute) is lost "in the crowd; but alone, I could never receive so good content "from the nail as from the flesh."

The treatises on the guitar, which appeared down to the end of the Eighteenth Century, did not trouble to give hints or express any opinion on tone: they left the mode of its production to the free choice of the executant. It was only when the guitar was finally fitted with six single strings, that the two tendencies became distinctly manifest.

AGUADO, GIULIANI, CARULLI and others used and recommended the use of finger nails; whilst SOR, CARCASSI, MESSIONNIER and others proscribed them. What might have been the reasons for their different choice? The aesthetic ideas of each master may have been a sufficient justification. Would the

(1) See Giuseppe BRANZOLI: "Ricerche sullo studio del liuto. Delle corde metalliche", Roma 1889, págs. 53.

(2) "Les Luthistes", Lionel DE LA LAURENCE, París 1929.

force of heredity explain it? Let us take, as examples, SOR and AGUADO, who are the most explicit on the matter.

It does not appear from any biographical account of SOR that he ever played with nails. Only in his Method, in which his fundamental theories on technique are fully analysed, discussed and clearly explained, he declares that when he wished to imitate the nasal tone of the oboe, he bends his fingers and attacks the strings near the bridge, with his short nails: "This "is the only instance" he adds, "when I thought of using nails "safely. I could never suffer a guitarist who played with his "nails."

He made a single exception, however in the case of AGUADO, on account of his brilliant execution: "AGUADO's technique had "to possess the excellent qualities it did possess" says SOR, "for me to condone his use of nails. Indeed, he himself would "willingly have given up the use of nails had he not acquired "with them such great dexterity, and had he not reached a "period in life when it was too difficult to alter the habitual "action of his fingers. No sooner had AGUADO heard some of "my compositions than he set himself to study them, and asked "my advice as to their interpretation. But, although I was too "young then to presume to point out faults to such a famous "master, I ventured to suggest to him the disadvantage in the "use of nails, especially for my music which was conceived in "a spirit utterly unlike the conceptions of the guitarists of the "period. Some years later when we met, he acknowledged "that if he were able to start over again, he would play without "nails."

This statement does not agree, however, with AGUADO's own words as inserted in the last edition of his Method which appeared in Madrid in 1843, four years after SOR's death. In it he says, "I have always used them (nails) on all my

"fingers — including the thumb — but, after hearing my friend Sor, I decided not to use the thumb nail any longer, and I am very glad I have done so, because playing with the flesh, when the thumb is not striking the strings at a right angle, produces a vigorous and pleasant tone, which suits the bass part, generally played on the bass string."

"My long experience may allow me, I hope, to express my candid opinion on the matter."

"I consider it preferable to play with the nails in order to obtain from the guitar strings a tone unlike that of any other instrument. To my mind, the guitar has a character peculiar to itself; it is sweet, harmonious, melancholic; at times it becomes majestic, and, although it does not admit of the grandeur of the harp or piano, it yields, on the other hand, a delicate grace, and its sounds are susceptible to such a number of modifications that it gives the impression of a mysterious instrument, lending itself admirable to expression and the accompanying of the voice."

"In order to produce these effects I prefer to play with the nails, because, if properly used the resulting tone is clear, metallic and sweet; it must be understood, however, that the strings are not struck with the nails only, because then the sound would not be very pleasant. The string is attacked first with the finger-tip, the fleshy part of it that faces the thumb, with the fingers somewhat stretched out (not so bent as for playing with the tip only) sliding over the string to the nail. The nails must not be too hard; they must be trimmed into an oval shape, and barely over the surface of the flesh, for, if they are too long, they interfere with the dexterity by considerably delaying the action of the strings, and, moreover, make the touch less sure; used in the right way they enable very fast runs to be executed with great clearness."

AGUADO's musical education was quite unlike that of Sor. The latter was educated in severely austere surroundings in the Monastery of Montserrat, where, besides learning solfeggio, harmony and counterpoint, he studied the violincello and was a member of the fine choir, for which that monastery has always been justly famed. In spite of all these occupations, Sor did not neglect the guitar. Padre MARTIN, Sor's schoolmate during his five years stay in the monastery, relates the prodigies Sor performed on his guitar, keeping spell-bound all who heard him play. On leaving the monastery, he continued his studies in singing and instrumentation in Barcelona, and produced his opera "Telemaco" with great success, in the Santa Cruz Theatre Towards 1803, when an officer in the army, Sor played at a concert arranged in Malaga by M. QUIPATRI, the Austrian Consul in that city. He amazed all who heard him, professionals and others, by his brilliant performance on the double bass of theme with variations.

AGUADO says Luis BALLESTEROS, in his biographic dictionary, "showed very early an excellent aptitude for study, and began at eight to learn Latin grammar, philosophy and French in which subjects he made great progress in a short time; later he applied himself to the study of Paleography and his untiring industry won him the title of Paleograph of the Council of Castile. By way of relaxation and recreation he acquired the rudiments of guitar playing, and was taught by Fray Miguel GARCIA, a monk in the Monastery of San Basilio, who made him realise the great possibilities of the instrument."

"Sor himself tells us about his wonderful colleague; that his teachers played with the nails at a time when the general tendency was to execute brilliant and rapid passages in order to exhibit virtuosity and power and thus dazzle the public:

"they did not appreciate any other music but that which was "played on the guitar, and they called a string quartet, church "music. Fortunately, his personal inclination to work out his "own way independently of others, led him to a much higher "musicality."

However, his concert pieces, as well as his Method, reveal a musical mind tending to brilliancy in technique rather than depth of feeling and elevated conception.

Both Sor and Aguado were great guitarists; the superiority of the former is principally due to the musical and artistic aspect of his works. The classic spirit of their Sonatas, Fantasies, Studies, and Minuets is better expressed by playing with the finger-tips (without nails), which is more suitable for Chamber-music.

From the summit of his knowledge and experience, surveying an ever widening musical horizon, Sor embraces nearly all the departments of music, whilst Aguado, a captive to his guitar, is confined to the small world of its sonorous body, a stranger to all outside musical expression.

Sor lived an agitated and intense life; he was restless and passionate, intensely sensitive, unruly and possessing a fiery temperament, was a born fighter. He travelled a great deal and knew the intoxicating pleasure of great success in art, love and fortune, as also the grief of failure, oblivion and poverty. He died at 61 years of age, poor and victim to a painful disease attributed by some to his unruly passions.

On the other hand, Aguado's life was serene, effective and industrious. His natural bent for study, his fine musical sensibility and the spirit of order and method in his ideas, made him the fine teacher we know him to have been.

The death of his mother, from whom he had never been parted, affected the tranquility of his provincial life; he moved

to Paris, where his talent as an artist and his personal qualities won him the admiration of the greatest artists, and the love of all who came in contact with him. Returning to Spain on the 12th April, 1838, the coach in which he was travelling on arriving in Ariza (Aragón) was stopped by a band of Carlists belonging to Cabrera's army. Aguado was robbed of all he possessed and together with the remaining passengers was taken to the mountains, being told that unless he paid a certain sum of money as a ransom he would be put to death. However, his old age and gentle disposition succeeded in softening these men, hardened by a long war, and he was the first to be set free unconditionally.

His great kindness as well as the love and intelligence he poured into his work is evident in his letters to Monsieur De Fossa.

We may now enquire whether the distinctly different styles of playing of these two artists was due to heredity.

The majority of devotees of the guitar in such cities as Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, London, Copenhagen, etc., play unconsciously, maybe with the fleshy tips of their fingers; whilst in some other parts, the nails are generally used. Once they have learned the usual procedure of the particular place in which they happen to live, they follow, without questioning, the rules established by custom.

So it might be taken that Sor's sense of sonority was influenced by a style probably general in Catalonia; and Aguado's by the style possibly prevalent in Castile. But this does not seem probable, when we bear in mind that we are dealing with artists whose discerning minds and toil show the highest and most disinterested spirit of intelligent generosity and sincere love of true art.

*Influence of AGUADO, ARCAS and TÁRREGA's Schools. Tone produced with finger tip. Difference between TÁRREGA's system and his predecessors. TÁRREGA's artistic evolution and reasons for his choice.*

From the time when these prominent figures stood out in such bold relief, AGUADO's Method became a guide to future guitarists and was, incidentally, an effective means of a wider adoption of the nail style, even in the exceptional case of TÁRREGA, who, up to 1900, like the other guitarists he knew, including ARCAS, used the nails. He did not realise in those days the possibility of producing a better tone. This was during the period of his youth when his concert tours brought him such great fame. But his restless and inquiring mind had one day to face the vexed question of tone. When he decided to do this, he put aside, not without doubts and misgivings, everything that stood in his way, and in order to plunge at once into the deep and arduous search for a means of purifying his art, he abstained for a long time from playing in public, which in his precarious financial position demanded from him great sacrifices. He had to work constantly in order to conquer the difficulties of the new technique in which he was to be master and pupil at once, and when at last these difficulties were overcome, those who heard TÁRREGA play will never forget the wonderfully pure sound his guitar produced.

In order to obtain the tone with the fingertips that TÁRREGA did, it does not suffice to cut one's nails short; the tone has to be formed; i. e., a certain balance between touch, resiliency and resistance must be developed in the flesh of the fingertips, which can only be acquired by constant practice and care.

Indubitably, the tone SOR produced "without nails" must have been quite distinct from the tone TÁRREGA obtained, as also AGUADO's tone "with nails" must have differed from TÁRREGA's before the latter altered his style of plucking the strings.

TÁRREGA, without using the nails at all, generally attacked the string perpendicularly, and after the attack, rested on the next string. This procedure, which gives a maximum of amplitude, intensity and purity of tone, on account of the width, smoothness and firmness of the body which displaces the string, was not applied either by SOR, AGUADO, or any of their contemporaries; this can be deduced from their writings, and it is fair to suppose that, had it been otherwise, they would have mentioned it in their respective treatises.

At the beginning of his career, TÁRREGA was influenced by a period of bad taste. His programmes were made up, as were those of his contemporaries playing other instruments, of works whose musical value consisted solely in their serving as a pretext for the most daring feats of virtuosity. Fortunately, however, as had been the case of AGUADO before him, his natural disposition, his keen perception and good taste, impelled him towards a purer atmosphere. His evolution is marked by a gradual process in musicality; first he was absorbed in MOZART, HAYDN, and BEETHOVEN; then CHOPIN, MENDELSSOHN, and SCHUMANN followed these in his studies. Finally he was inspired by the spirituality of Bach's music. Selecting those works best suited to the instrument he achieved the miracle of interpreting them on the guitar's six single strings, even the Fugue of the 1st. Sonata for violin solo. Moreover thereafter his own original compositions reflected a deeper aspiration towards pure music.

This "purism" was bound to be reflected in his tone. The strings struck without the use of nails gave him the sonority of his dreams; a pure, immaterial and austere timbre. With constant work he obtained a perfect unity in the notes plucked with any finger and on any string. Having thus mastered the "principle", he proceeded to discover new timbres and subtleties of execution, which gave to his interpretation greater relief and a persuasive enchantment.

TÁRREGA's preference for tone without nails is founded on the fact that such an unresponsive medium as nails, interferes, somehow, with the direct contact of the artist's sensibility to the string. The guitar plucked with the fleshy fingertips becomes in a way a prolongation of our own sensibility, and in the case of an essentially emotional temperament like TÁRREGA's, this argument appears to us irrefutable.

The change in the style of striking the strings adopted by TÁRREGA cannot be attributed in the least to the influence of imitative or conventional feeling; it was a resolution taken after much thought and arrived at gradually after surmounting a succession of difficulties, and was the result of his longing for perfection.

*Causes which hinder a proper appreciation of sound. Intervening factors in the formation of critical judgement. Subjective classification of sound.*

The lack of official recognition and protection which has been, and still is, the lot of the guitar in almost every country, has unfortunately brought about the most deplorable anarchy concerning its technique.

For every kind of instrument taught in our conservatoires, there exists a suitable method or system adopted by the teacher, which helps the student to get a result in proportion to his individual ability. When there occurs some discrepancy among different teachers on any particular point of technique relating to the same kind of instrument, such a discussion, very seldom, if ever, leads to any radical change in the general result of studies.

The teaching of the guitar is done mostly by teachers who have picked up whatever little they know, at random, in methods of faulty schools, or from misleading hints of so-called masters. They teach in their own way "what they know". The pupil anxious to enlarge his knowledge, meets with insurmountable obstacles and there is no method of modern technique capable of satisfying his longing for knowledge and the few masters qualified for the task are not always at hand.

The would-be-learner is fated to grope blindly to find the road that may best take him through so many difficulties.

A natural result of this state of things is that a critical opinion formed under these circumstances is likely to be unaware not only of the importance of difference in sonority, but even of there being any difference at all.

Our perceptive faculty is developed and shaped by the influences which surround us, inducing us almost always to disagree with everything not in sympathy with them. Only the chosen few succeed in keeping an open mind, so that their own previous convictions do not hinder them from the understanding of new facts and other people's opinions. Questions of aesthetics are sometimes better settled through this channel of intelligent perception, than by our experienced reasoning power.

Therefore, when dealing with the forming of an opinion on sound which would not exist without our faculty of hearing, we cannot establish any other classification but that which is dictated to us by our individual appreciation, in accordance with our auditive power, which acts in a direct manner on our minds.

*Physical character of sound. Its classification in instruments and styles. Sound of a string attacked with nails. Sound of a string struck with fleshy fingertips. Superiority of the sound produced with no nails.*

Intensity, pitch and timbre are the particular attributes of sound in acoustics. Whenever two or more notes of like intensity and pitch produce an unlike sensation, they must be of different quality.

This difference, which may vary ad infinitum, comes under the judgment of our critical faculty and is susceptible of classification. A proof of this is found in the fact that the classification of certain instruments of the same type is based on the conditions of their sonority. That which made the instruments of the Cremona craftsmen so much more valuable than those of other makers — and this may also be said of PACÉS and TORRES guitars and a few others — was not only the volume, but the beauty of the sounds they could produce.

Similar strings, put on different guitars and plucked by the same person at the same place on the string, will produce a different sonority on each instrument. The sound we think the better will certainly be the one produced on the guitar that possesses the best conditions of sonority; therefore, we should classify this guitar as "better" than the others.

Now, let us note that the same instrument in similar conditions, does not sound alike in the hands of different performers. CASALS's cello, KREISLER's violin or a piano of an especially good make would not yield the same kind of sound when played by different hands. Therefore, we can infer from this that there exists on one and the same instrument a kind of sonority of a higher class which results from the particular procedure of each artist.

The sound of the string depends on: (1) the manner of attacking it; (2) the spot where it is attacked and (3) its diameter, tension and elasticity. As the nail is a body with a hard surface, of varying thickness and consistency, its impulsion gives the string a penetrating brilliance of timbre, somewhat metallic but restricted in amplitude. The sound produced by the impulsion of the finger-tips, i. e., by a soft body subtly sensitive and of greater thickness and surface than the edge of the nails, yields a distinct timbre of greater volume, sweet-ness, fulness and purity.

The different ways of attacking the strings are characterised by the quantity and intensity of the higher harmonics which accompany the fundamental sound, more considerable in proportion to the more numerous and marked discontinuities which exist in the vibratory movement. The finger, on striking a string sets it in motion in all its length before leaving it. A discontinuity occurs only the more or less wide opening of the angle which obtains in the exact place where it has been struck by the finger. This angle is more acute when the string is attacked with the nail than when it is attacked by the finger-tip. In the former case, we get a more piercing sound together with a great number of high harmonics giving the timbre a metallic tone. In the latter case, the vibrations are not so sharp, the harmonics alluded to are no longer heard and the timbre

is not so brilliant, but sweet and sonorous. Furthermore, although in both cases the fundamental sound is more intense than its respective auxiliary sounds, yet, the harder the attacking body used, the more audible these become to the detriment of the fundamental sound.

This may be tested by attacking the string with a hard medium such as the nail or a plectrum, and it will be noticed that a sharp and metallic sound is the result; if we listen with due attention we can hear a number of high notes above the principal sound. If now we strike the same string with the fingertip, these notes cease and the resulting sound is not so brilliant, but sweeter and fuller.

Hence the thin tone produced by the nail, which destroys the fundamental sound and increases the auxiliary sounds, is against the full and pure tone brought about with the fingertip.

The change of timbre on one single string within a single system of pulsation is equally related to the theory of natural harmonics. The purest tone is obtained on the half length of the string on which is found the note of its first harmonic; the further we go from that point, towards the extremities the weaker and more nasal becomes the tone.

The material of which the strings are made and their thickness, also has an influence on the timbre. Very tight strings do not yield very high harmonics on account of the alternative inflection in small divisions of their total length. Gut strings are lighter and their elasticity is not so great as that of wire wrapped strings; hence the shorter duration of sound in the former, especially with natural harmonics, and higher auxiliary sounds (1).

(1) See: "Théorie Physiologique de la Musique", H. HELMHOLTZ translated by M. G. GUEROUlt, page 105-113.

If we take into account the accepted standard for the classification and grouping of instruments of the same kind, and for sonorities produced on the same instrument, we shall evidently feel inclined to give our preference to the sound without nails, which is closer to the pure tone of the harp or the piano than is the sound produced with nails. This indeed in its way, seems to sing the praise of the plectrum. A lute fitted with single strings, and a guitar played with the nails, are both inadequate for interpreting certain passages of expressive music. And, in the case of the pianoforte supplanting the harpsichord the quality of tone produced by a felt hammer must have greatly influenced its adoption.

*Perception of sound according to our physical sense. Suggestion of sonority with nails. Similar aspect of the opposite sonority. The public and technique. Properties, advantages and tendencies of each procedure. Ecletism in art. Conclusion.*

Our preferences must take into account that as sound serves music, so does music serve the spirit, which is subject to the constant evolution of life.

If we put aside our cold reasoning power, when considering sound under its physical aspect, and give ourselves up to that divine faculty of evocation belonging to our minds on which the highest conception of music rests, each sonority will suggest in our subconsciousness a distinct feeling which will be the spiritual reflex, the most convincing factor. maybe, in coming to a decision on the remaining aspects of our dilemma.

The sound produced with the nails strikes one's ear as if each note were a very small, sharp arrow piercing our sensibili-

lity. It is conical, pungent and nasal, reminiscent of the lute and the harpsichord, with an odour of frankincense and a savour of ancient ballads; it calls up gothic altar paintings and primitive styles, and is like an echo of the poetical ideology of the troubadours and minnesingers. This style seems to recall a long and distant past full of rich and noble exaltations of the spirit. It is the sonority which **FALLA** has expanded in well balanced proportions in his "Concert for Harpsichord" genial reflection of the Spain of the Middle Ages, austere and profoundly Christian.

The tone of a string struck with the finger-tip possesses an intrinsic beauty, which affects the deepest feelings of our sensibility, just as air and light permeate space. Its notes are incorporeal, as might be the notes of an ideally expressive and responsive harp. It has, as well as this intimate character, some of the Roman strength and Greek balance. It recalls the gravity of an organ or the expressiveness of a violincello. The guitar ceases to be feminine and becomes an instrument of grave virility. Finally, this style stands for the transmission, without impurities, of the deepest vibrations of our emotions.

The audiences who listen to the guitar, generally speaking, are far from being in a position to understand these differences. They can scarcely realise the musical and instrumental possibilities which the guitar affords an artist. The appreciation of its technique and its aesthetic qualities is limited to a very small number of experts, and it will be long before it reaches the perception of a great part of the public.

Although both methods of impulsion offer the artist parallel fields of means and resources of expression, the nature of this small difference marks out certain particular properties of each.

The nail gives prominence to colour-properties of the instrument (commonly called "effects"). We get crystal clear harmo-

nies and thrilling vibratos; triplets can be played at amazing speed, emphasising thus the nasal tendency of the string; arpeggio scales and legato passages can be taken easily and the "rasgueado" is brilliant and showy. A very interesting bag of tricks which the guitarist should use with moderation if he wishes to avoid the danger of running into a deplorable musical illusionism.

As the strings yield instantaneously to the action of the nails, the fingers of the right hand can thus obtain the effect desired with a minimum effort, and, consequently, the resistance of the fingers of the left hand becomes considerably diminished as being no longer necessary. Since diminution of weight (or resistance) is synonymous with speed, this style favours open positions of the fingers, passages of barres, legatos, jumps with the left hand, etc., together with precision and clearness of tone and agility in the movement of both hands.

These qualities allow guitarists to perform with less difficulty and greater brilliance feats of agility, which are admired by a certain part of the audience as showing a greater mastery of the instrument. And this admiration the public shows the artist by an hypnotic current that becomes established between the passive attention of the listener and the active attention of the executant, is the best confirmation in the latter of his confidence and trust in himself.

The qualities connected with playing with the fingertips and without nails are different. The volume, uniformity and fusion of notes on the whole extension of the strings are welded together and directed with a feeling of musical sobriety. The chords now achieve the maximum of unity, intensity and volume; the tremolo is no longer metallic and brilliant, but acquires an ethereal sonority; the pizzicato is clear and acute on all the strings, and the arpeggios and scales obtain all the volume of

which they are capable, together with equality and regularity of tone between the notes. This style of attacking the strings does not lend itself to showy effects; on the contrary, although the artist can find in it all necessary elements of expression, he must utilise its resources when required, if he does not wish the unity to degenerate into monotony.

As the fingertip is a resilient body, wider than the nail, it must apply more strength to displace the string, and this increased strength in the right hand requires in turn a greater effort of pressure and resistance in the left for the production of the held notes. Hence, any passage of barres, slurs or slides, open or close positions, and also some passages of virtuosity, are more difficult to master.

Each style, however, embodies a distinct mentality; the one spectacular and tending to exteriorize one's personality, and the other intimate and sincere, deeply penetrated by the spirit of art.

We should bear in mind that, amongst all the properties of the guitar, the most important of them—in which respect it is probably not surpassed by any other instrument—is its power of adaptation to the spirit of the art which it interprets.

Eclecticism in art can wonderfully change defects into qualities; in the same way as an austere sonority may suit a classic musicality, a bright sonority may impart more authority to certain music of a particular style or character.

It would be a pity if we concluded our essay without giving an opinion on our old dilemma. What matters in art is the spirit. Let us be glad, then, that the guitar should offer this duality of aspects which will allow each artist to realise his own work with sincerity and gather, through it, the just reward of his merits.

## EMILIO PUJOL

### Le dilemme du son à la guitare

Traduction de Jean Girodon