

## ALTERNATING BETWEEN NAIL AND FLESH: IS IT POSSIBLE?

By Steven Watson

One of the most vexed debates in the guitar's history is whether to play with nails or flesh alone. A persistent assumption—sometimes explicit, usually tacit—is that there is no middle ground. For Emilio Pujol, the foremost advocate for no-nail playing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question of nail versus flesh was

just as important a question of dogma as is a problem of belief for a moralist. The aesthetic opinion of each partisan reflects his personal nature. Every preference requires an attitude distinctive from the rest and finally leads to diametrically opposed positions [...] The respective timbre is very different and as it is impossible for the same set of fingers to exercise both methods at once, the guitar player must decide in favour of the one or the other. There lies the problem. Which method is to be preferred?<sup>1</sup>

Pujol would compare no-nail playing to the more uniform sound of the harp, piano, or string quartet, in contrast to an orchestral conception of the instrument exemplified by nail players such as Miguel Llobet and Andrés Segovia.<sup>2</sup> Although his preference was for flesh playing, Pujol was tolerant of nails—most of his students used them. “Some people think I prefer the sound without nails,” he said to students in 1973, “but the principal thing is to have a good sound, whether with or without nails.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he continued to believe that they are “distinct and parallel sonorities” that could co-exist but are intrinsically separate.<sup>4</sup> This was not just on account of physical incompatibility—Pujol also viewed the flesh/nail debate ideologically. The guitar offered a “duality of aspects,” he argued: “the one [nails] spectacular and tending to exteriorize one's

personality, and the other [flesh] intimate and sincere, deeply penetrated by the spirit of art.”<sup>5</sup>

Beautifully expressed though it is (Pujol is surely one of the guitar's finest writers), Pujol and others made the mistake of turning a distinction into a division. The first thing to note is that there have been players who converted from nail to flesh without a radical change in their style.<sup>6</sup> Nor can one draw any general conclusions, especially about personality, when examining the repertoire, interpretations, and timbres of flesh-versus-nail guitarists (there are “naily” flesh players and “fleshy” nail players). And most curiously of all, there have been guitarists, both historic and contemporary, who have discovered various ways to alternate between nail and flesh.

Indeed, in a fundamental sense, neither flesh nor nail technique can be entirely exclusive. While there have been nail players who insist they do not use the flesh, most cultivate a right-hand stroke that combines flesh and nail at the initial point of contact with the string. For no-nail players, there is also a sense in which the nail is used, for although it never touches the string it does have a role in supporting and shaping the fleshy fingertip.

Let us go further. Fernando Sor and Dionisio Aguado are, respectively, the two most well-known exponents of flesh and nail techniques in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—yet neither adhered wholly to either technique. Sor used his nails as a special effect, and Aguado, influenced by Sor, cut off his thumbnail.<sup>7</sup> Sor and Aguado are far from the only players

<sup>1</sup> Emilio Pujol, “Polemics for Guitarists: The Dilemma of Tones,” *Austrian Guitar Review* (English ed., 1930): 9.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Emilio Pujol, *Notes intimes per a una biografia*, ed. Jordi Guimet i Perenya, 121, [www.associacioemilipujol.cat/notes.html#all](http://www.associacioemilipujol.cat/notes.html#all). As far as I know, Pujol never mentions that Fernando Sor (who played without nails) also used orchestral metaphors when describing the timbral possibilities of the guitar. Moreover, it is curious to note that Pujol's music nevertheless contains various timbral effects, such as his varieties of pizzicato: *libre*, *apagado*, and *estridente*. See Emilio Pujol, *Escuela Razonada de la Guitarra: Basada en los principios de la técnica de Tarrega: Libro Primero* (Buenos Aires: Ricordi Americana, 1956), 97. (In the score of *Guajira*, Pujol refers to these varieties of pizzicato respectively as *ouvert*, *naturel*, and *strident*.)

<sup>3</sup> John D. Roberts, *Guitar Travels* (Artes Gráficas Soler, 1977), 520.

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Pujol, “La guitare,” in *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire: Deuxième partie technique - esthétique - pédagogie*, ed. Albert Lavignac and Lionel d. La Laurencie (Paris: Librairie Delarave, 1926), 2023; Roberts (see note 3), p. 640, recalled that in 1975 “he [Pujol] has been to Italy, presiding on the panel of the Competition ‘Fernando Sor,’ and comfortably lodged in the Spanish Embassy. At the moment of award he disagreed with his fellow-judges, and abdicated. All the competitors were nail players, and he would not, in the name of Sor, award the prize to a nail player.”

<sup>5</sup> Emilio Pujol, *El dilema del sonido en la guitarra* (Buenos Aires: Ricordi Americana, 1960), 58.

<sup>6</sup> For example, if one listens to recordings of Carles Trepat before he cut off his nails in 2021, the difference is important but subtle; it is certainly not a radical transformation from extravert to introvert. It is surprising that Pujol did not also reflect on the example of his teacher, Tárrega, about whom he wrote a biography, and whose no-nail playing was not a radical change from his past. There are not two Tárregas—he continued to play the same repertoire. Rather than a fundamental shift from extraversion to introversion, his no-nail playing was the logical final step toward a sound world that was already highly developed when he played with nails.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Sor, *Method for the Spanish Guitar*, trans. A. Merrick (R. Cocks, [c. 1832]), 16–17; Dionisio Aguado, *New Guitar Method*, trans. Louise Bigwood, ed. Brian Jeffery (London: Tecla, 1981), 11.