

LA GUITARRA ESPAÑOLA

The guitar music of Gaspar Sanz



GORDON FERRIES

Gordon Ferries is one of Scotland's foremost lutenists and early guitarists. A founding member of Fires of Love, he has worked with the Scottish Early Muisic Consort and the BT Scottish Ensemble among others and performed at venues and festivals throughout the UK. A CD of Sanz's music, played by Gordon, has just been released on the Delphian label.

For today's classical music listener, the baroque guitar repertoire is one with which few would claim familiarity. There are however two examples which have slipped out from their esoteric provenance. Firstly, a g-minor *passacaglia* by Roncalli¹ which Respighi set as one of his *Ancient airs and dances*, and secondly, the music of Gaspar Sanz; Spanish guitarist, composer, writer and priest, whose works found modern ears through Roderigo's *Fantasia para un gentilhomme*.

My first contact with Sanz was listening to a *canarios* on an old Julian Bream record. When, as a student, I heard his music on a baroque instrument years later the effect was shocking, but nonetheless galvanised me into specialising in historical plucked strings. Fortunately, in today's climate, Sanz's music can easily be heard on an original instrument, without the classical and romantic accretions of Roderigo's versions.

While the guitar used by Sanz and his contemporaries differs greatly from the modern instrument, it shares many similarities with the lute, including a carved or layered parchment rose, tied on gut frets and double strings known as courses. The guitar had five courses; four double and a single first string. The strangest feature to modern listeners, however, is Sanz's choice of stringing and the effects which it produces. He favoured a system without basses (bourdons), producing a 're-entrant' tuning where the two lowest strings

sound higher than the third. Sanz believed that this facilitated the neater execution of decorations and an effect known as 'campanellas', where adjacent notes in runs are sounded on different strings, producing a merging of notes unique to this instrument.

Tuning and stringing were by no means standardised in the seventeenth century, and the issues involved form a hotbed of debate among both scholars and performers². Though the adoption of Sanz's tuning presents some problems, it definitely brings us closer to his original intentions.

All of Gaspar Sanz's music comes to us preserved in his *Instruccion de musica sobre la guitarra Española*³, which is also our main source for biographical material about him. Born in Calanda c.1640, Sanz graduated in theology from the University of Salamanca, and subsequently travelled to Italy to pursue his studies in music, principally with Cristforo Caresana, organist at the royal chapel in Naples, and also Lelio Colista, the Roman lutenist, guitarist and composer.

During his time in Italy, Sanz became familiar with the music of the guitarists of the Italian school, including Foscarini, Granata, Kapsberger⁴, and Corbetta, whom he describes as 'the best of all'. However much Sanz may have admired these figures, he found fault with the paucity of information provided on the playing of their works, and was particularly concerned about the absence of rules on composing

'without a teacher on hand'. He was also troubled with the lack of familiar Spanish sources, to give beginners 'instruction in the same music and songs that they ordinarily hear', and the amelioration of this situation was of the utmost importance to Sanz.

Although little else is known of Sanz's life, we understand that he published two literary works; a 1678 translation into Spanish of Daniello Bartoli's *L'uomo de lettre* (1654), and a eulogy in praise of Pope Innocent XI, *Ecos sagrados* (1681). In addition he provided a Latin epigram to Torre's 1721 translation of John Owen ('The British Martial'). This helps us conjecture that Sanz may have been alive during the year of its publication, although the date of his death has been postulated as early as 1710.

Sanz's *Instruccion de musica*, engraved by the composer himself, and dedicated to Juan of Austria, is without doubt the most important source of seventeenth century guitar music and information pertaining to it. He bestows upon the reader a plethora of invaluable insights, unavailable elsewhere, including stringing, fretting, the reading of tablature with its *rasgueado* (strummed) and *punteado* (plucked) notation, how to play in time, alongside explanations of his ornamentation⁵. This information forms an invaluable source for the performance of Spanish music of the period in general.

The work is divided into three books, the first of which contains much of the above information and begins with two *labarintos*. The first of these is a table using the *alphabeto* system⁶ of chords, enabling the player to perform *pasacalles* in all keys, while the second gives examples of unusual chords or *falsas*. A varied selection of dances follows, commencing with the most denuded forms of ground basses, which

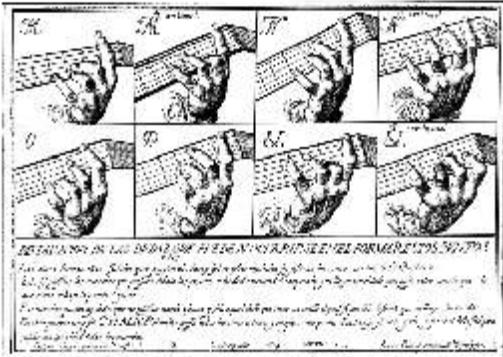
are subsequently brought to the height of sophistication in the later pages. These include the *jacaras*, *gallardas*, *folias* and *pasacalles*. Book one also contains the piece that is arguably Sanz's most famous, a set of variations on the *canarios*, alongside a set on the *jacaras*, with its pungent Iberian flavour already presaging flamenco. These complex *diferencias* can easily be superimposed upon the preceding grounds, allowing players of varying standards to play together, not dissimilar to the way in which modern rock and pop guitar books are presented. Also notable are the two full scale suites encompassing a more cosmopolitan style, redolent of Corbetta's music⁷.

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In addition, book one includes examples of how to accompany from a figured bass, demonstrating that the guitar, alongside other plucked strings, was regularly used for continuo playing.

Book two opens with more detailed information about the modes or *tonos* used in Spanish music, and comprises a wonderful diagram showing hands in the positions of the *alphabeto* chords. Musical highlights include another two settings of the *canarios*, a *pavanas*, with a complete section in *campanellas*, and various other Spanish grounds including the *marionas* and the *maricapolos*.

The final page is also worthy of note, being a snapshot into an otherwise lost world of popular songs, many of which are military in provenance. Sanz calls the collection *Clarins and trumpets with some very curious songs both Spanish*



A diagram from Book 2 of Sanz's 'Instruccion de musica' showing hands in the positions of the 'alfabeto' chords.

and from foreign nations. Titles include *The Neopolitan cavalry with two clarins* and *The French coquette*.

Book three falls within a practice already established in Italy, of presenting a series of *pasacalles* in 'all of the eight most popular modes of plainchant'. This became a standard for later guitarists/composers to follow. In these ten *pasacalles*, Sanz exploits the full gamut of the guitar's potential, including *rasgueado*, figurative passages (*passeo*), *campanellas* and *cromaticos*. The composer relates in his preface, that he received 'royal applause and pleasure' on playing them to Don Juan of Austria.

... an intoxicating mixture unlike anything else in Europe

Taken as a whole, Sanz's oeuvre is a panoply of seventeenth century Iberian secular music, which authentically conjoins the essence of popular culture to the subtle and complex art of the court virtuoso. His literary style simultaneously achieves a virtuosity of its own, blending musical erudition with effortless classical allusions.

The passage comparing the guitar with a woman⁸, belongs to the well established tradition, both literary and pictorial, of sensuality and sexuality associated with the guitar⁹. Indeed it is hard to reconcile Sanz's religious background with his work, given the church' obloquy towards the sensual movements of dances featured in his work. The *zarabanda*, for example, danced in public, could result in flogging or a term on the galleys! Seen in this context, Sanz embodies this turbulent period in Spain's history. With its golden age over, the ghosts of the long-expelled Moors begin to seep back into the culture, creating an intoxicating mixture unlike anything else in Europe.

¹Published in 1692, Ludovico Roncalli's 'Capricci armonico' is an important contribution to the Italian guitar repertory. Facsimile edition available from Spes Editions (Florence).

²The interested reader should consult 'Baroque guitar tuning and stringing, a survey of the evidence'. Monica Hall. Available from the Lute Society.

³Published in Zaragoza 1694/95 and 1697. Available as a facsimile from Minkoff editions (Geneva).

⁴Unfortunately, no guitar music by Kapsberger has come to light, although his lute, theorbo and vocal music are available from Spes, and are well worth investigation.

⁵Another minefield! A more detailed overview can be found in 'The guitar and its music' Tyler and Sparks.

⁶The 'alfabeto' or 'abecedario' was a system first developed by Amat. It uses chord shapes shown in tablature, usually given at the start of the book. Each chord has a letter unrelated to its tonality. A= G major, B= C major, etc. The letters were then placed above the stave in vocal music, on their own for strumming or in some cases mixed into the tablature.

⁷Corbetta is actually the earliest composer to use the term suite for a collection of dance movements.

⁸The guitar is like a lady, but one to whom the saying "look at me but don't touch" does not apply; for its rose is quite different from a real rose, since it will not wither however much it is touched with the hands, and moreover, if it is plucked by the hands of a skilled master, it will produce in them ever new bouquets which delight the ear with their sonorous fragrances.'

⁹The 'fete galante' paintings of Watteau are a good example of this.

[Listen to Gordon Ferries playing the music of Gaspar Sanz on *La Preciosa*, Delphian Records DCD34036.]