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MIGUEL LLOBET'S VARIACIONES SOBRE UN TEMA DE SOR

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Variaciones sobre un Tema de Sor, Op. 15, from 1908 is the capital work of Miguel Llobet and one of the great guitar solos in variation form. Llobet exploited the full potential and sonority of the guitar in this composition through a variety of techniques such as slurs, arpeggios, tremolo (or a form thereof), and harmonics, along with different combinations of these effects, that push the abilities of players to the limit—so much so that we might characterize Llobet's *Sor Variations* as a comprehensive study in the guitar technique of his day.

I. Theme and homage

Llobet evinces in the *Sor Variations* something of a spiritual connection with his 19th-century precursor and fellow Catalan. And it is not surprising that Llobet honored Fernando Sor through the variation form. This genre occupies a special place in Sor's oeuvre. Sor wrote variation sets as independent pieces as well as part of most of his solo and duo fantasies. Even the final movement of his *Deuxième Grande Sonata*, Op. 25, is in variation form. In his *Sor Variations* Llobet quotes exactly the theme and first two variations of Sor's *Les Folies d'Espagne*, Op. 15(a), expanding and developing Sor's treatment of the *folías* theme—the ancient tune here relegated to a “theme within a theme”—and in so doing, elevating Sor's modest *objet d'art* to a monument. In contextualizing this composition, however, we must not only center our attention on Sor's *Les Folies* setting rather than the original *folías* melody, but tease out correlations between Llobet's variations and a range of Sor's music. Throughout Llobet's *Sor Variations*, we can discern references, or at least parallels, to many Sor works and procedures, reinforcing the idea that, broadly speaking, Llobet's variation set pays homage to the earlier master and his overall compositional achievement.

For our purposes here, it is important to note that in addition to variations and other forms, Sor wrote numerous studies, each a pearl of guitar literature. Many serve not

only as vehicles to overcome specific technical difficulties but stand up as concert pieces, challenging the player's deeper musical intuition and exploring the instrument's expressive capacities. On the macro level, we see in Llobet's *Sor Variations* a synthesis of Sor's penchant for both the variation set and the etude. That is, each of Llobet's variations can also be comprehended as a discrete study, often looking back to Sor's own exemplars in that genre. Each addresses a specific technical challenge while also maintaining the harmonic structure of Sor's *folías* theme, thus serving the variation ideal. On a micro level, Llobet reflects in his homage characteristic details of select Sor etudes or other works.

II. Llobet's variations

Now I will briefly examine the Llobet variations one by one, primarily comparing them, given their pedagogical dimension, to analogous Sor studies. I do not necessarily wish to imply here a direct cause-and-effect relationship in the details of Sor's and Llobet's music, though such is possible in places, but rather consider the commonalities in the two composers' artistic-pedagogical sensibilities.

Variations 1–3

As mentioned above, Llobet's Variations 1 and 2 are lifted verbatim from Sor's original two *Les Folies d'Espagne* variations. From Variation 3 on, however, Llobet charts his own course. Llobet's third variation is based on a double ascending legato, in the manner of grace notes, followed by a descending arpeggio. Sor's widely known Studio No. 3, Op. 6, displays an analogous, albeit opposite, style: fast double descending ligados followed by unarpeggiated chords (**Figure 1**).¹

Also, the progression of tonalities in this study happens to be reversed in comparison to Llobet's *Sor Variations*: E major–E minor–E major!



Figure 1: Sor, Studio No. 3, Op. 6, mm. 1–4.

¹ Musical excerpts from Sor's Op. 6 in this article are taken from Frederick Noad, ed., *Fernando Sor. Op. 1–20* (New York: Shattinger, 1976); all others from Brian Jeffery, ed., *Fernando Sor: Complete Works for Guitar*, 5 vols. (New York: Shattinger, 1977).

VARIACIONES SOBRE UN TEMA DE SOR: (cont.)

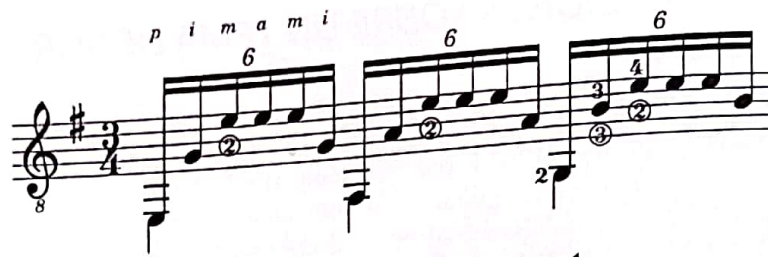


Figure 2a: Llobet, *Sor Variations*, var. 4, m. 1.



Figure 2b: Sor, *Studio No. 16*, Op. 29, mm. 1-6.

Variation 4

Llobet's Variation 4 is based on the quasi-tremolo figure shown in **Figure 2a**. A similar but inexact parallel occurs in Sor's *Studio No. 16*, Op. 29, much slower in tempo and focused on the open first string (**Figure 2b**).

Variation 5

In Variation 5 of Llobet's homage we see natural harmonics appear for the first time, combined with arpeggiated thirds traversing most of the fretboard. Many studies and other works of Sor address the use of parallel thirds, block or broken, in a variety of contexts. His *Studio No. 6*, Op. 6, offers a close cognate to the technical challenges presented in Llobet's fifth variation (**Figure 3**).

Variation 6

In his Variation 6, Llobet features ascending, arpeggiated chord forms moving through multiple positions. Many of

Sor's larger-scale compositions require similar execution of fast-changing chords. From his studies, *Leçon No. 20*, Op. 31, in block-chord form provides a clear example (**Figure 4**).

Intermezzo and Variation 7

Between Variations 6 and 7 of the *Sor Variations*, Llobet inserts an Intermezzo. This movement might be best described as a study in optimal melody playing, a value also deeply ensconced in Sor's compositional aesthetic. The following Variation 7 is entirely devoted to descending and ascending ligados. Again, Sor designed many of his studies for the practice of just such slurring techniques, as we saw in **Figure 1**.



Figure 3: Sor, *No. 6*, Op. 6, mm. 1-9.



Figure 4: Sor, *Leçon No. 20*, Op. 31, mm. 1-6.

Variation 8

Variations 8 and 9 stand out particularly as examples of Llobet's imaginative use of guitaristic devices to create a unique sound and original compositional approach to his instrument. Variation 8 employs natural harmonics exclusively. In doing so, it very much evokes Sor's Studio No. 21, Op. 29, the first sixteen measures of which are likewise comprised exclusively of natural harmonics (Figure 5). Of course, Sor utilized harmonics liberally in more complex forms as well, such as *Fantasia Villagoise*, Op. 52, and movement 2 of the *Deuxième Grande Sonata*.

Variation 9

Llobet's Variation 9 is distinctive in being played with the left hand only by means of copious slur techniques. We find an analogue of this idea in one of Sor's last works for solo guitar, *Fantaisie Elegiaque*, Op. 59. Near the beginning (instruction is written below the staff), Sor specifies that measures 3–6 be played only with the left hand (Figure 6). Llobet expands this idea to the n^{th} degree as he subordinates his entire ninth variation to the left hand alone.²

III. Conclusion: Variation 10

In his last variation, Llobet brings his *Variaciones sobre un Tema de Sor* to a masterly climax. From the viewpoint of technique, we can acknowledge this variation as an accumulation of nearly all that precedes it. From the viewpoint of musicality, Variation 10 forms a *brillante finale* to the entire cycle, a cycle consummated not only through continuous development of Sor's *folias* theme but through a carefully controlled expressive framework rising to an inexorable endpoint. Thus the work is fulfilled, and the legacy of Sor, one of the preeminent composers in the guitar's history, is highlighted and renewed.

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La sixième Corde en B \flat .



Figure 5: Sor, Etude No. 21, Op. 29, mm. 1-5.



Figure 6: Sor, *Fantaisie Elegiaque*, Op. 59, mm. 1-13.

² *Editor's note:* Whereas Sor's published works through Op. 33 remained in print from their initial appearance forward, those after Op. 33 quickly dropped out of circulation, not to be resurrected until Brian Jeffery issued the complete Sor guitar works in facsimile in 1976. So how much access did Llobet have to Sor's later opuses? Though they were hard to come by in Spain, Jeffery writes: "Llobet could easily have seen them when he was in Paris...from 1904 to 1910, and then travelled to a great many other places where those late Sor works might easily have been available. In Buenos Aires they certainly were. So yes, it is practically certain that Llobet would have known them" (email correspondence with B. Jeffery, 17 January 2019).