

That the guitar is a supremely Romantic instrument is clearly shown by its natural capacity to give expression to both intimacy and fervour: as Victor Hugo said when he heard the celebrated Huerta, "these are not strings that sigh; it is a voice, a true voice that sings, speaks and weeps." Indeed, historically speaking, one of the guitar's moments of greatest splendour, the so-called *Guitarromanie* that stormed the European capitals during the first thirty years of the 19th century, coincided perfectly with the explosion of the Romantic movement itself.

From Thomas Moore, Coleridge and Byron to Hoffmann, Mazzini and D'Azeglio, writers, patriots and even composers (see Schubert and Weber) saw the guitar as the Romantic bard's ideal companion: not only because it was portable and could accompany the voice with ease and immediacy, but also because the pungent melancholy of its sound faithfully mirrored the ultimate Romantic duel between the contingent and the absolute.

Curiously, however, the solo works of the great virtuosos, like Giuliani, Sor, Carulli and Aguado, are strictly anchored to the neo-classicism that the Romantics saw as their chief enemy.

And it is only recently (ever since musicologists began to take a serious interest in the instrument) that today's virtuosos have started to focus on the large and significant production of Mertz, Regondi and Coste, composers now justly considered as the founders of a genuine Romantic

guitar school.

The mere title of the collection called *Bardenklänge* (literally 'sound of the Bards') is already redolent of Romantic themes - an impression further reinforced by the individual titles of the 30 works included (miniatures, dances, studies and character pieces of varying lengths). But the most striking thing of all is the way the music appropriates the characteristic traits of Romantic piano writing: and the success of this operation can be measured by its achievement of a genuinely distinctive idiom, based on models that include the Mendelssohn of the *Romanze ohne Worte*, the Schubert of the *Lieder* and the miniaturist Schumann of the *Kinderszenen* and the *Dauidsbüdlerlänze*.

The work was published by Haslinger of Vienna in 15 separate instalments: the first 13 appeared between 1849 and 1853; the last two probably at the end of the century.

It was in fact in Vienna that Mertz, a native of Pressburg (today, Bratislava), spent most of his career, enjoying the direct patronage of the Empress Caroline Augusta and earning the fame and respect that made him the most celebrated guitarist of his time. Mertz married Jacqueline Plantin, a French pianist, with whom he embarked on an important concert career, touring Poland, Moravia, Russia and Germany.

He died at the age of only fifty after a long illness, just a few days before being awarded first prize at the international competition for guitar composition and construction organized in Brussels by the Russian diplomat Nikolaj Makarov, himself

a guitarist of stature.

Indeed it is to the *Memoires* of this picturesque character that we owe a valuable first-hand description of Mertz and his art (perhaps the most trustworthy of the few surviving accounts).

"Mertz was a man of about 50 years, tall and of normal build, neither fat nor thin, modest and with an attitude completely free of all claim to greatness ...

he played on my guitar a fascinating piece and, to my question about who the composer was, replied that the work, as yet unpublished, was his ... he played others, of the same very high level...

I felt like a new Columbus:

I had discovered America, for he was without doubt the great composer for the guitar for whom I had vainly searched throughout Russia and Europe...

his music contained richness of composition, musical skill, excellence in the development of ideas, unity, novelty, grandeur of style and a total absence of vulgarity... the 'effects' were brilliant and stimulating, yet behind it all there was a profound understanding of the instrument with all its possibilities and hidden secrets."

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