

Expressing Ourselves: Another Look at an Archetypical Nineteenth-Century Guitar Study Set—Carcassi Op. 60

by Stanley Yates

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We can be hardly anything but amazed at the development over the past decade or so of the playing technique exhibited by our student guitarists. What was once, and not too long ago, considered exceptional is today quite commonplace. What does remain, however, and it gives me little pleasure to mention it, is a student-guitarist culture of inexpressive playing. One of the principal reasons for this is obvious: guitar music is so often published without the use of phrasing slurs, dynamics or other expressive markings. While we may also acknowledge that the guitar, with its technical idiosyncrasies and relatively limited dynamic range, is perhaps not the most facile instrument upon which to express detailed dynamic nuance,¹ this is all the more reason that musical expression be a central aspect of our pedagogy.

With this in mind, I would like us to take another look at one of the major study sets of the nineteenth-century guitar repertoire, a publication that, unusual in the didactic repertoire for the guitar, contains copious detail of marked expression—Matteo Carcassi's *25 Études Mélodiques, Op. 60* (1836). Despite the fact that this study set (which serves as an addendum to the composer's *Méthode Complète pour la Guitare, Op. 59*) has been reprinted many times over through to the present day, and that there can hardly be a guitarist who is unfamiliar with it, I feel there still exists a basic misunderstanding regarding the fundamental aim of the collection and, therefore, a missed pedagogical opportunity.

The title of the collection, *Études Mélodiques* (“Melodic Etudes”), itself presents an obvious clue to understanding the true value of the pieces it contains: not only are they melodically attractive—something that accounts for their continued popularity—they also serve as an invaluable guide to playing expressively. They provide, in fact, a model of refined *bel canto* expression. Few didactic works for the guitar have been published with such detail of expression markings as those found in this collection.² Furthermore, Carcassi's markings are logical and systematic. They provide, therefore, both an opportunity for students to develop a tasteful expressive vocabulary and playing style and a model that may be applied to the many works of similar style published without such markings. Let's take a closer look.

¹ *Agogic* (rhythmic) nuance of course applies equally as well to the guitar as it does to any other instrument, but this is perhaps a subject for another time.

² They are not, however, the sole examples of well-notated guitar music from the nineteenth century. During the same period we can point to numerous works by such figures as Mauro Giuliani and Johann Kaspar Mertz for further examples (in contrast to the much-played, and excellent, music of Fernando Sor—which was routinely published with virtually no expression markings of any kind).

Tempo Words

While many of the studies from this set are used today to help student guitarists develop playing technique—scales, arpeggios, slurs, shifts, etc.—which is quite appropriate, considering that such technical elements are often presented quite systematically in the collection—this can easily result in performance tempos that are at odds with the expressive character of the music itself. Since tempo is one of the most important factors in projecting the expressive character of a piece of music, an inappropriate one will likely be in conflict with other notated expression intended to project a quite different expressive feeling. For example, one often-played study from Carcassi's set, No. 2 in a-minor, invariably suffers from a much too-fast and inflexible performance tempo. Carcassi marks this study "Moderato con espressivo," a marking which suggests a degree of rhythmic flexibility and a good deal of dynamic ebb and flow (something supported by the expression markings found throughout the piece).

Carcassi employs a fairly wide range of specific tempo words over the course of the study-set:

Andante, Andante mosso and Andante con espressivo
Andantino
Moderato and Moderato con espressivo
Allegretto and Allegretto grazioso
Agitato
Allegro, Allegro moderato and Allegro brillante

While each of these terms implies a fairly specific range of tempos, they are not simply indications of speed—they are, more properly, indications of musical character.

Developing Dynamic Control on the Guitar

Since by far the majority of expression markings contained in the study-set relate to dynamics, it is important that the student has developed the technical means to differentiate between a number of dynamic levels in order to perform the studies themselves. The perception of relative degrees of loudness and softness is an interesting and, perhaps, non-intuitive subject. Playing twice as forcefully or doubling the number of instruments playing a passage, for example, results in a listener perceiving something becoming not twice as loud but only slightly louder, if that. On an instrument such as the guitar, which we must admit is capable of producing only a relatively limited range of physical volume, the projection of dynamic contrast requires some consideration.

In my view, it is essential that student guitarists develop a solid technical and perceptual understanding of three broad levels of physical dynamic: normal (*mezzo-forte*); soft (*piano*) and loud (*forte*); that they are able to produce these on demand, and that they are able to switch between them *subito*, immediately. These three levels can be nuanced on the guitar to create a wider range of levels (such as *pianissimo*, *mezzo-piano* and *fortissimo*).

I find it invaluable in my own teaching to attach descriptive words to these broad levels of dynamic, to characterize their effect and help provide an internal feeling for that character. For example:

mf – normal, speaking, comfortable
p – soft, gentle
pp – whispering, secretive, mysterious
f – forceful, hard, agitated
ff – shouting, inflexible

(Obviously, the range of possibilities is almost limitless.)

We can also think in terms of the *quality* of sound, rather than simply of the *amount* of sound. The guitar is capable of quite broad changes of timbre which, when applied to a dynamic change, can be a great help in projecting an expressive or structural effect.

In addition to immediate change from one dynamic level to another, we must also consider gradual change between levels: *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. Again, and particularly on the guitar, these effects require some thought in order to develop the ability to project them in performance. The reality is that we can do little more on the guitar than move between three or four literal dynamic levels. To do this over a span of more than three or four notes, therefore, requires that we apply our changes in a series of graduated steps. A *crescendo* applied over two measures of common time, for example, might be achieved over a series of two-beat steps: *pianissimo*, *mezzo-piano*, *mezzo-forte* and *forte*.

On an even more practical level, it is often helpful to begin a *crescendo pianissimo* and a *diminuendo forte*, regardless of the actual prevailing block dynamic in effect at the particular point in the music.

A Few Necessary Definitions

Carcassi employs a quite broad range of dynamic indications over the course of his study-set (some of which are rarely used today):

block dynamics: **pp, p, pf, mf, f, ff**
accentuation: **rf, rinf, sf**
graduation marks: *cresc., dim.* (along with their corresponding “hairpin” signs)

Of these, the markings **pf**, **rf**, **rinf** and **sf** require clarification.

Although **pf** was often used to indicate a variety of effects—as were a number of other markings found in early nineteenth-century scores by composers writing in varied genres, in varied locations and for varied instruments—it seems most likely that Carcassi employs the marking as a block dynamic, in the sense of “poco forte” and equivalent to our **mp** marking.

The remaining symbols requiring clarification, **rf**, **rinf** and **sf**, are marks of isolated accentuation within an otherwise prevailing block dynamic. We should bear in mind, however, that a mark of accentuation doesn’t necessarily mean “loud.” Rather, these marks mean “louder,” their relative strength dictated by the block dynamic within which they occur. Carcassi uses the marking **sf** in the bass voice only, often prepared by a *crescendo* hairpin sign, and usually in a prevailing loud

(*mf* or *f*) block dynamic, all suggesting a fairly strong accent.³ The marking *rf*, on the other hand, may appear in the bass or in an upper melodic line, usually without an accompanying hairpin sign and often in a prevailing *p* or *pf* block dynamic, suggesting a more moderate degree of accentuation than *sf*. The marking *rinf* is often traditionally associated with accentuation over a short series of notes, perhaps including a diminuendo or a “swell” (*crescendo-diminuendo*) as part of the effect. Nevertheless, I’m inclined to believe that Carcassi’s use of the term is simply synonymous with *rf*, which is used as its abbreviated form.

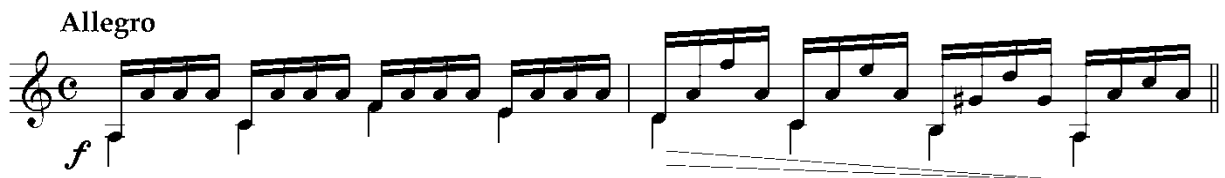
Carcassi also makes a common distinction in his use of the words *cresc.* and *dim.* and his use of dynamic hairpin signs: hairpin signs generally occur over short spans within a prevailing block dynamic, as nuance, while the words *cresc.* and *dim.* are applied to larger gestures and almost always connect two block-dynamic markings, often outlining a broad melodic ascent or descent.

The Musical Function of Carcassi’s Expression Markings

Musical Character

The opening dynamic of a short piece of music does much to define its overall expressive character, especially if it is something other than a “default” *mezzo-forte*. Carcassi provides an opening block dynamic indication for each of the studies in the set, and these often provide a strong suggestion as to the overall character of the piece. The opening *forte* dynamic provided for Etude No. 7, for example, establishes an *agitato* character for a low-medium register passage that if unmarked would likely be performed *piano* or *mezzo-forte* [Figure 1]:

Figure 1. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 7*, mm. 1-2.



Melodic Expression

Carcassi routinely uses a diminuendo hairpin sign to shape an *appoggiatura*—a two-note melodic dissonance-resolution, “sighing,” figure. Etude No. 3 is built almost entirely from such a figure and is marked accordingly [Figure 2]:

³ Further, technical, implications—beyond the scope of this essay—exist for the early nineteenth-century guitarists’ use of terms of accentuation, especially when applied to the bass voice.

Figure 2. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 3*, mm. 1-2.



Carcassi also employs dynamic markings to shape broader melodic effects. Melodic ascents and descents and other changes of register, for example, are routinely provided appropriate *crescendo* and *diminuendo* markings. Etude No. 2 provides an example [Figure 3]:

Figure 3. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 2*, mm. 1-4.



Harmonic Expression

Carcassi often shapes a short-scale harmonic dissonance-resolution figure with the use of an accentuation marking (*sf* or *rf*), which usually appears in the bass voice. A series of such figures appears in Etude No. 2 [Figure 4]:

Figure 4. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 2*, mm. 5-7.



The rhythmic effect of such figures can often result in an interesting syncopated effect, as in Etude No. 7 [Figure 5]:

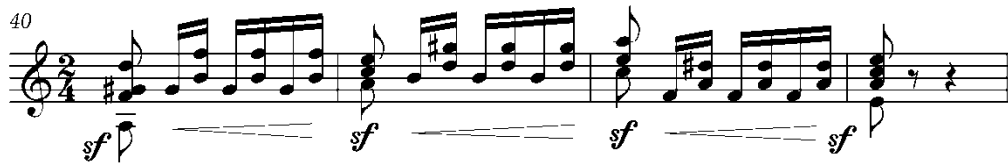
Figure 5. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 7*, mm. 13-14.



Clarification of Musical Texture

Carcassi sometimes employs dynamic markings with a more practical intention—to clarify the musical texture. A *sforzando* marking is applied in this way in Etude No. 17, providing a series of dramatically-shaped motives which connect islands of “orchestrated” chords [Figure 6]:

Figure 6. Matteo Carcassi, *Etude No. 17*, mm. 40-43.



Larger Structure—Rhythm Words

Carcassi also often shapes the larger structure of the music with the use of the tempo words *ritenuto*, *ritardando* and *rallentando* (along with their abbreviated forms, *rall.* and *rit.*) at major structural junctures (this is not to say, of course, that the introduction of more subtle, unmarked rhythmic alteration to articulate more local levels such as phrase endings, etc., is inappropriate to the style). We may distinguish between these terms as follows: *rallentando* indicates a gradual slowing, and is usually used to close a study, while *ritenuto* indicates a sudden holding back of tempo, usually at sectional junctures. *Ritardando* may be considered synonymous with *rallentando*.

In Conclusion

The expressive effects described here represent only a few of the more obvious devices employed by Carcassi throughout his set of 25 studies. Other effects include affective changes of musical character (sometimes *subito* and unexpected), the shaping of larger tension-resolution figures, and the affective shaping of section endings (which may employ a strongly dramatic *fortissimo* or a gentle understated *pianissimo*). Nevertheless, a sensitivity to only those devices described above should be enough for any student to create a satisfyingly expressive performance.

To finish, a brief word concerning editions. As already mentioned, this set of studies has been published and re-published many times over since its first edition in 1836. However, not all subsequent editions have remained faithful to Carcassi's original, carefully-marked expression. I would therefore recommend that teachers and their students seek out an *Urtext* or *Critically-Edited* edition to work from.