

THE ROMANTIC GUITAR: FRENCH OR ITALIAN INFLUENCE?

Historically, the guitar is an instrument that owes as much to Italy and to France, and its makers have never ceased to 'invent' new improvements to its lutherie. The first 6 string guitars appeared simultaneously in Paris and in Naples at the end of the 18th century.

Under the reign of François the 1st, Italian artists were welcome in France, particularly musicians, who were numerous and resided in Paris. They were real "stars", adored by the public and incensed by the critics. The guitar had always been a "fashion" instrument and in the beginning of the 19th century it conquered all audiences thanks to its new format of 6 strings, launching it in modernity. Italy, in the beginning of the 19th century, was the muse of numerous French poets and artists. Napoleon the 1st, the French Emperor, a wise strategist, encouraged French artisans to practice their craftsmanship in the courts that he had instated in the most important Italian cities. Napoleon hoped he could thus export the French "savoir faire" to influence Italian artisans. At the same time, he brought to France the Italian works of art that seduced him to install them in his residences or in the Louvre Museum. Turin was a French province, and Naples a fashionable destination after the French Joachim Murat was "crowned" King of Naples in 1808, succeeding the Emperor's brother, and most of all since he encouraged with great enthusiasm excavations on the site of Pompeii, the town that disappeared under the eruption of volcano Vesuvius in the year 79 D.C. Stendhal, a lover of Italy, friend of Rossini, wrote that there were two capitals in Europe: Paris and Naples! In 1834, Berlioz composed "Harold en Italie" for the Italian virtuoso Nicolò Paganini to be played on a viola made by Stradivari that he had just acquired for himself. Generally, Italy, not yet reunified, played a preponderant role in the cultural life of Europe.

In the beginning of the 19th century, in France, guitars made by Lacote were preferred amongst guitarists. Lacote became famous and obtained public recognition between 1820 and 1860. We know he apprenticed with Joseph Pons, the great luthier of the 19th century, the audacious designer of the 'romantic guitar' in France. We would like to briefly make a summary of what Pons and Lacote brought to the Parisian lutherie of the beginning of the 19th century:

- first of all, an intensive research on bracings, concretized by the position of the second bracing in the centre of the soundboard, and the first Y and X bracings,
- an interior counter bridge, in maple, with Pons,
- small vertical bracings under the acute notes,
- beginning of the neck joint,
- the very particular fingerboard-heel joint that allows for a more important tension of the strings,
- backs of guitars made with a beautiful often knotty veneer, veneered on spruce, a light and nervous sounding wood,
- the frequent use of blocking systems for the pegs and the first mechanics,
- above all, the "palette" or "8 shaped" guitar heads, directly inspired by Neapolitan guitars.

René Lacote, Parisian luthier, also fell to the Italian charm and adapted his lutherie to what he observed on the instruments of the famous musicians frequenting his Paris workshop. During the first period of his activity, he would put "fantasy" bridges similar to those of Pons, with their funny moustaches inlaid with mother of pearl sometimes engraved under the bridge, replacing the inner counter bridge. He designed others, in particular the model that can be seen on the method that Sor had just written which obtained a big success. Later, around 1835, Lacote definitively adopted his own model, inherited from Pons, in "bicycle handlebars". As he progressed with his career, the bridges as well as purflings and "pistagnes" gained in sobriety. Near the end of his career, he would insert only a few linear purflings, sometimes in very plain wood, together with a very extended bridge.

We can observe the influence of Italian luthiers in this curious but elegant bridge, similar to those of Carlo Godone. We can observe this influence in the purflings around the edges of this guitar by Lacote of 1832 very similar to those applied on this other Filano made one year earlier, in 1831! The flowery motives around the soundhole of this Lacote also came from Naples disrupting the habits of linear purflings or pistagnes with geometric motives used by the Parisian luthiers.

The specific bracing used by Lacote in his guitars under the bridge is, in our opinion, his answer to the Italian luthiers. Instead of the large flowery moustaches laid on both sides of the bridge, or the long and voluminous bridge used by the Turin luthiers, he invented this "scalloped bar" to give the mass and necessary rigidity to the sounding board that he preferred to leave free.

Of course, the first Italian influence that can be observed on French guitars is the typically Neapolitan "palette" head used by many of the Parisian luthiers.

Guitar was the "fashionable" instrument of the "high society" and Lacote and Fabricatore became competitors and by means of interposed virtuosos fought an unmerciful war between themselves. Whereas in Paris some of the Neapolitan techniques were adopted with enthusiasm, it is funny to note that in Italy the first 6 string guitars were called "French guitars". Italian luthiers went through a period of reflection and transition with the result that they constructed around the years 1780 – 1800 numerous five simple string guitars, in between the 5 course and 6 strings, while in France luthiers changed rapidly from 5 course to 6 simple strings, without making too many five-string guitars. Ory and of course "the excellent" Lambert offered this type of guitar, but few of these instruments have survived whilst we have counted numerous five-string guitars made in Italy, in Naples as well as in Turin. The guitar-lyre went through the same influences, French or Italian, but remained an instrument more preoccupied by fashion than by musicality.

In Turin, luthiers – both violins as well as guitars – were influenced by their French colleagues, very numerous in town at that time. Numerous luthiers coming from Mirecourt settled there, bringing their know-how with them. Carlo Guadagnini, the 'star' luthier in Turin, used a guitar pattern very similar to that of Parisian Lambert; same format, same ribs, same sober decorations, flowery moustache bridges. His brother Gaetano, created an extremely new personal model that owed nothing to French lutherie.

A touching anecdote is to be added to this approach of comparisons between Italian and French styles, at a time when everything was new about guitars; a nice guitar by the great Carlo Guadagnini dated 1797. When this guitar arrived in our workshop, we asked ourselves important questions regarding its style, mixing happily together the French and Italian specificities. The pattern of the box is taken from Lambert but the soundhole located in a higher position on the box is typically Guadagnini, the blocks are Italian and the back made of several pieces ; the maple is taken sideways, contrary to the grain! The neck is varnished in black – Italian procedure – but the head's profile is Parisian with holes reinforced with tiny pieces of ivory, a technique only found on Italian instruments. Sober purflings around the soundhole are absolutely typical of Turin; the bridge is not piercing the soundboard. The fingerboard is made of several pieces of ebony, glued one after the other in a row. The soundboard is of a very nice spruce.

In 1797, 6 string guitars were still an "avant garde" phenomenon and our conclusions can seem hasted, but taking a look back, the mix of styles is evident on this instrument. We had to open this guitar to restore it and, under the bracings, we could read written with pen and ink:

“François Tessier
Officier de l’armée de Bonaparte
Montenotte 1796”
*(François Tessier,
officer in the army of Napoleon,
Montenotte 1796)*



These lines were obviously written before closing the box, at the luthier's workshop.

They can tell us that a soldier, officer with Napoleon Bonaparte's army, after the victory of Montenotte on April 12 1796 (at that time French territory, near Genoa), visited a luthier to order a guitar. As a custom with musicians, he probably tried several instruments before selecting one; in the meantime, Carlo Guadagnini, then 28 years old, examined a guitar that this young officer brought with him, noting this or that detail or set up. So, the officer signed the bracings of his future guitar on a finished top not yet glued to the box. The Turin luthier made unusual operations for this French customer: the head is of normal size but the profile typically French – remembrance of the 18th century – and the back made of several sections of laterally cut maple; Guadagnini would usually work with one piece backs, generally from local fruit trees. Maple, more expensive, was reserved for the making of instruments of the violin family. The guitar is dated 1797, a few months after the signature and date on the bracings, which corresponds to the time necessary for Guadagnini to finish and consign the instrument to François Teyssier.

All these unusual details used by this luthier - most appreciated for his guitars in his time - could give us the indication that in that period, 1797, perhaps difficult, materials were lacking! Not enough ebony to make a single piece fingerboard: it was made in four assembled pieces. No maple for the back, not even two pieces, so in order to save a little on wood he was obliged to make it in three assembled pieces joined underneath the bracings. It meant more work of course, but it cost less and in that way he could use small pieces, or remnants left from the making of violins that his father and his brother were constructing. Regarding the soundboard, he probably wasn't aware that it was already wormed and badly damaged; the bracings – signed by François Teyssier - and the blocks that he glued were sane and contained no worm gallery. A letter by Gaetano 1st, Carlo's brother, addressed to Count Cozio di Salabue, tells us that the Guadagnini family was soliciting from their generous sponsor a substantial help in order to buy wood and go on with the making of musical instruments (cf. Il Salabue).



These simple instruments modestly summarize the complexity of the guitar history between France and Italy in the early 19th century, showing how the influences of both countries interacted to result in the most popular musical instrument of that time: the guitar.

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