

Interview with Matanya Ophee (1932-2017) **A Life for Guitar Music**

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Who was Matanya Ophee?¹ A combat pilot who survived being shot down during the Sinai campaign in 1956 and later a veteran captain of the US Airways fleet? A classical guitar player and a passionate all-over-the-world archive digger in search of forgotten treasures of post-Napoleonic French, Russian, Italian, and Spanish guitar repertoires? An inspiration to contemporary composers all over the world to create new works for guitar? A champion publisher of guitar music—*Editions Orphée*? A rebellious son of a rebellious homme de lettres—Aaron Pollack (1892–1960), the author of studies on the etymology of the Hebrew language and tabooed Bible interpretations, as well as opera singer and cantor, one of the regulars of the famous bohemian gatherings at Café Kassit in Tel Aviv? A historian–musicologist, the author of numerous articles in many languages and the fundamental book on the history of guitar music?² Passionate aficionado going so far as to learn Russian in order to read Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* in the original language? Untiring internet forums’ polemist? Why were you Ophee and not Pollack? The word means “character” in Hebrew, and this seems an auto-description. Did anyone have any doubt?



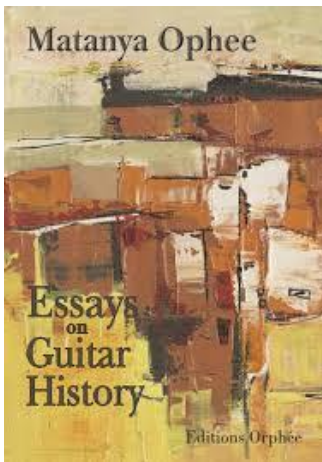
Matanya Ophee the captain, 1988

¹ The interview, while authorized by Mr. Ophee, is published posthumously. My thanks to his widow Professor Margarita Mazo for final reading the text.

² Matanya Ophee, *Essays on Guitar History* (Editions Orphée, 2016).



With one of his favorite guitars, early 1990s



Cover of *Essays on Guitar History*

The guitar is a kind of Cinderella in the still snobbish world of classic repertoire and, accordingly, in the mainstream of academic musicological research. Yet, it is a rich world in itself, with its public performance practices and intensive studies in a wide range of fields. Matanya Ophee developed a highly scholarly approach, contributing to research in the guitar's history and repertoire.

His last trip was to the southern French town of Perpignan for the international event in his honor to celebrate his life achievements. The celebration was an “event within an event.” The larger event was an annual conference and performances that took place on 31 August 2017, to fête the birthday of the Perpignan native nineteenth-century composer François de Fossa. The fact is that it was Matanya Ophee who rediscovered this composer. Rescuing him from total oblivion, Matanya restored de Fossa's legacy, found and published most of his compositions, discovered his portraits and numerous letters, and created the documented biography putting him on the map of nineteenth-century European culture. The story goes back to the 1980s, and it is well covered in his book *Luigi Boccherini's Guitar Quintets* (Editions Orphée, 1982), articles and interviews. No wonder that Perpignan became proud of its celebrity. That year's conference was organized by a growing French national association *Les Amis de François de Fossa*; Matanya was honored there as a contributor and as a celebrant. He was received with great enthusiasm and appreciation and was named The Honorary President of *Les Amis de François de Fossa*. It was a highly rewarding experience for him and, as it happened, the closure of his entire career and life.

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M.R. How did you come to discover François de Fossa?

M.O. By accident.

M.R. What were you looking for?

M.O. For the microfilm reading machine. It was in the late 1970s, and I needed to read a microfilm. I was working on another project then. The library in New Hampshire did not have such a machine, but they had a catalogued collection of music manuscripts that somebody had donated to them half a century earlier, and nobody had ever touched. My glance just fell on that cabinet, and from that moment my life took another course. Surprises accompanied this story from the very beginning, and, as far as it unfolded, they only continued to flow.

M.R. Which of them was the most fascinating?

M.O. That's difficult to answer, because, you know, when you assemble a puzzle, even a small detail that you don't pay much attention to for its insignificance, can suddenly, over the years, answer a big question. Besides, when you study a document, and you return to it several times, each time it tells you as much as you are able to understand. I mean that the deeper you get into the epoch, into the document's context, the more it reveals to you. It was striking from the very beginning, because François de Fossa was not only a newly discovered good composer and guitarist, but also a serious aficionado of Luigi Boccherini, and among de Fossa's manuscripts I found previously undocumented copy of Boccherini's guitar quintets.

M.R. Boccherini is already our common ground.

M.O. Exactly, and this was a blessing, because when I came to this field, of course from the guitar part of his legacy, there was already a substantial foundation on Boccherini research, including the annotated catalog of his works by Yves Gérard.³ It still needed to be complete, and I am happy to contribute my findings.

M.R. What kind of findings?

M.O. Unfortunately for those who strive to systematize Boccherini's oeuvre, but fortunately for music lovers who highly valued and enjoyed his music, he made many arrangements of his own compositions for different ensembles. But this is only a part of the problem. Another part is that the composer used (or was asked to use by his sponsors, friends, and clients) a modular approach. He assembled movements from his different compositions. This was great for his public, but a disaster for a cataloger. Boccherini's thematic catalogs appeared already in the nineteenth century. In the end, however, autographs of his works had been either lost or unavailable, and all that scholars and

³ Yves Gérard, *Thematic, Bibliographical and Critical Catalogue of the Works of Luigi Boccherini* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

publishers can see today are copies. Comparison between the copies can only provide a few crumbs of reliability. And, above all, as the scholars of the eighteenth-century music know, his works circulated mostly in parts, not full scores. Like many scholars, I started by correcting my predecessors, but as long as you continue to work, your enthusiasm changes and becomes enhanced by maturity, and you end up correcting yourself. There is still a lot to research, and I am happy to be part of creating a much more detailed and clear historiographical picture.

M.R. In what sense?

M.O. Unlike many other eighteenth-century composers, Boccherini remained being interesting for amateurs and professional performers of chamber music far into the nineteenth century, and his music was a desirable part of salon repertoire. Possession of copies of Boccherini's compositions brought intense joy, and it was a great pastime for noble amateurs to play them. The participation of the guitar as an instrument for all social classes, I believe, made Boccherini's audience even wider. It is not by chance that de Fossa was a combat officer, and Louis Picquot, a passionate collector of Boccherini's manuscripts and information on his life, was a tax collector. It is true that they interacted with the Marquise de Benavent, one of those noblemen who commissioned various arrangements from Boccherini. Altogether, Boccherini's music created high public and commercial interest at the time.

In my research ardor, it was important to me to identify myself with the objects of my investigation. I wanted to feel as if I had lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, in Paris, in Madrid, in Perpignan, where the precious archives had (and still have) a lot to reveal. Working there and in many more archives of Europe and the United States, I found the correspondence between de Fossa and Picquot. I was able to restore numerous facts of de Fossa's biography in considerable detail based on his six-hundred-letter correspondence with his sister; and documents of his life, birth, death, and military service. All this knowledge accumulated alongside the information on music publishers, library catalogs and auctions announcements, as well as graphological comparisons of handwritings in order to identify the copyist or the possessor, juxtapositions of dates and localities of all the personae of my story, and more.

M.R. Your other field of research is Fernando Sor. How did this develop?

M.O. His extensive guitar legacy and his fabulous life still leave many unsolved questions.

M.R. Did you work on both ends of the subject?

M.O. Yes, because they are so interconnected that one cannot make progress on one of them without studying the other. Any new piece of information on one casts new light on the other. As a publisher, I began from his compositions. Today, contrary to the nineteenth-century publications of guitar music, one has to know what exactly he publishes, even if it is not a *kritischer Bericht*. It appears that only rare examples of Sor's work made everything clear—the year of its creation, its opus number, the identity of its dedicatee, the sources of

themes in variation cycles, the extent to which the first publisher could distort the composer's intentions, and sometimes even the authorship itself.

M.R. Too much vagueness, would you say?

M.O. No lack of. For example, Sor sometimes changed the opus numbers of his compositions. It completely disorients anyone looking at them, and prevents setting a chronological order. Or the identity of a dedicatee: it could have been his lover, or a nanny to his daughter....

M.R. Or both?

M.O. Perhaps, but I am not a novelist. Seriously, the name of a dedicatee could have cost Fernando Sor his entire future. This is my hypothesis, and no more than that, but it is possible that one wrongly chosen dedicatee (even if the composer had no choice but to dedicate the piece to the exiled Prime Minister Manuel Godoy who commissioned it, though using the euphemism "Prince of Peace") could have presented a fatal obstacle for Sor's return to Spain. If Sor's and Godoy's fates intertwined, it could partly explain his falling out of political grace.

M.R. Sor also spent several years in Russia. Did you manage to clarify this chapter of his life?

M.O. Because he was a peerless guitar virtuoso, like Paganini or Liszt with their instruments, his name was surrounded by legends. I was able to trace the origins and developments of several anecdotes concerning his interaction with Russian colleagues Andrei Sychra and Mikhail Vyssotsky. For example, one such anecdote states that being highly impressed by Vyssotsky's performance, Sor smashed his own guitar on the grand piano in despair. According to another version, he broke it over Vyssotsky's head—too idiotic, and not funny. None of these anecdotes was true. Russian sources ascribed to Sor the first use of certain Russian tunes as themes for variations. I revealed that the first usage should be ascribed to the violinist Bernhard Romberg. There is also a dark forest of arrangements. Consider that Russians played, and many still play, a seven-string guitar. This means that the entire popular Western guitar repertoire for six-string guitar was to be arranged for Russian consumption. No wonder then that Sychra arranged Sor's works, and vice versa. Both names appear as composers in different editions. Who plagiarized from whom? It is impossible to know. Of course, early nineteenth-century practice still carried features of the eighteenth-century one, which was much less restrictive with regard to copyright, with its constant borrowings and pasticcios, than the following epochs.

M.R. Now, about the reasons for Sor's coming to and leaving Russia after the brief period from 1823 until the end of 1826. While it is clear that Sor arrived in Russia with his, as you write, "wife-cum-partner" the prima ballerina and choreographer of the Moscow Imperial Bolshoi Theatre Félicité Hullin-Sor (1805–mid-1850s), and was fine at the beginning, did you manage to learn something about the end of his own Russian period?

M.O. Unfortunately, not much. Paradoxically, while he himself later described his life, and in considerable detail, he was very much reserved about his Russian years, and there are many more questions than answers. This somewhat strengthens the sense that there was an unhappy turn of events. He left Russia alone, while Hullin-Sor remained in Russia until the end of her life and, by the way, contributed tremendously to the foundation of the Bolshoi ballet tradition. Was his leaving associated with their separation? There was also an unclear and unfortunate episode in his life connected with his early military career during the period of Napoleon's invasion of Spain. Sor was first in the national resistance, then joined the side of those who surrendered. After Napoleon's fall, this eventually prevented him from returning to Spain. He petitioned the Vatican, and seemed to be cleansed politically, but it remains unclear if his musical occupation with the guitar somehow prevented his case from being positively resolved. Disappointingly, little documented evidence remains of his performances in Russia. I found some traces for further investigations in Russian archives. But they demand as much commitment as I invested in de Fossa's life. This one is for other scholars....

M.R. Now for a Russian, Nikolai Petrovich Makarov (1810–90). In your writings, he appears as a fascinating character, who received recognition only in the last twenty or twenty-five years of his life, but remains little known today. You revived his figure and, through this, brought an important missing link to the European mid-nineteenth-century musical landscape. How can you characterize his legacy, his contribution to the development of European guitar music?

M.O. Makarov was the most interesting person. Apart from the world of guitar, he was quite well known as a lexicographer, the author of Russian-French, French-Russian, as well as German-Russian and Russian-German dictionaries that sustained many editions. As a guitarist, he was a great and selfless enthusiast, a true virtuoso and a very musical one, with a delicate ear and a sensitive taste. He was a strong supporter of one of the best nineteenth-century guitar composers, Johann Kaspar Mertz. He was in a passionate pursuit of the best repertoire and the best quality instruments. At a certain moment, after he familiarized himself with the cream of the European guitar world and realized that it was experiencing a certain stagnation in repertoire and instrument production mastership, he organized an international competition in Brussels (1856). Alas, this created more problems and expense on his part than discoveries of new talents, which was the goal, but it was nevertheless a stimulating historical event. Makarov had a wonderful collection of guitars from the best European and Russian masters. Finally, he left his fascinating and highly informative memoirs. He loved *le beau sexe* and the guitar with equal passion, and his memoirs, *A Heartfelt Confession*, published in Russia, reflect his womanizing and his guitar activities. The section on the guitar was already translated, long ago and not in full. It was not written in good English, poorly commentated, and is hardly available. Thus, I made an upgraded translation and published it.

M.R. What about his collection of guitars?

M.O. Little remained from his archive and collection. However, I was lucky enough to acquire several of his instruments. One of them, I believe, had been made by Johann

Gottfried Scherzer himself. It was highly valued by Makarov, and was made for that very Brussel competition.

M.R. You have contributed also to the history of guitar, to studies in the development of performance practice, and to the other fields. We can refer the reader to your *Essays on Guitar History*. I'll only ask you two more questions. First, I noticed that three of your protagonists: Françoise de Fossa, Fernando Sor, and Nikolai Makarov started or even continued their careers as military officers. In a way, even you yourself followed this path. Is this a coincidence or a certain pattern?

M.O. Both. A coincidence, because there were many such cases. Yet, there are many, even more, guitarists who have no connection to a military career. A certain pattern, because a military career was typical for nineteenth-century nobility. The officers had a lot of leisure time. Some of them drank and gambled, others played guitar. Why particularly guitar and almost no other instruments? First, because it is portable; second, because it plays harmoniously; third, it allows you to play in well-tempered manner quite easily, providing clean pitch; fourth, it pleases our ear physiologically with its acoustic richness; and fifth, like other string instruments, it gives a performer the closest possible physical contact with its sound, which is crucial for musical communication. That's quite a lot, isn't it?

M.R. It is well known that guitar recitals are problematic for today's concert practice. How do you see the most suitable conditions for its live performance?

M.O. The guitar is a chamber instrument. The salon is its natural environment. Moreover, in its golden age, the first half of the nineteenth century, the norm was a mixture of performers, often alternating instrumentalists and singers. Monotony can be overcome when different musicians mingle within the same musical event. True, the more participants, the less honorariums. But this returns us to the noble pastime of enlightened amateurs, where guitar music originated....

M.R. It is hard to survey in full your enormous accomplishments in this great field. What is the engine behind all your achievements?

M.O. I risk repeating myself, but I do not know a more precise expression than Blaise Cendrars's small saying, which changed my life (I paraphrase): "One does not need much talent or knowledge. All that is required is a love for that which is true, a deep curiosity and a sense of being." This is what made me a historian–musicologist.

Tel Aviv—Columbus OH, 2016–17