

THE MUSICAL REST AS A POLYSEMOUS SIGN IN THE GUITAR WORKS OF FERNANDO SOR

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In this article I analyze Fernando Sor's use of the rest, which in some of the composer's works functions polysemously, i.e., conveys multiple meanings. Before I proceed with my analysis, and to better understand what is at issue, I will first clarify the meaning of a few terms.

I. Definitions¹

Sign. An object, phenomenon, or action that by nature or convention represents or stands for another object, phenomenon, or action. Signs are placeholders for things, denoting or signaling devices or representations of something.

Signal. A gesture or some other kind of sign that informs, warns, or in some way provides information about something. As such, the signal replaces the written word or language. Signals originate in conventions, and so it is relative to these conventions that they are to be interpreted. A signal can be graphic, sonic, or of some other nature.

Symbol. A perceptually accessible representation of some reality, linked to characteristics associated with that reality by means of a socially accepted convention. As well as signifying themselves, symbols have a specific kind of denotative function: they convey messages that originate in the ideas they symbolize. The symbol is a sign that bears no resemblance or contiguity with the object, and its relation with that object is conventional or arbitrary.

Both signals and symbols are kinds of signs; they stand for some object but differ in the way they are connected with their objects. While a signal is not in itself a symbol, any symbol can also be used as a signal, in order to convey more than its conventional semantic content. Thus, the word "timber," besides denoting a wooden log, may also be used to warn me of a falling log.

Legisign. A sign that is a law, i.e., one that has a conventional, widely recognized meaning, like the musical score and all the specific symbols that make up a musical score, including standard rest indications.

Signal-rest. In addition to its conventional role as an indicator of musical silence and specific durations of silence,

the rest may also bear a non-strictly musical value, one tied to technical execution stemming from the mechanics of the guitar (though still serving the underlying musical intent). This I designate a signal-rest.

II. The signal-rest in Sor

Despite the fact that in Sor's time there was no widespread consensus on such matters, guitarists of his day borrowed the concept of "position" (or equivalent term in different languages) from bowed string instruments to address the left hand's longitudinal orientation on the guitar fretboard.¹ Sor, however, did not use this concept, opting instead for a fingering system governed mainly by the patterns of finger placements required to produce the intervals of the third and sixth, which he regarded as crucial to the layout of chords in different regions of the guitar's neck as mentioned in his method of 1830.² Providing the position number usually affords useful information for the performer concerning the location of the left hand relative to the instrument's fret number. Because Sor did not employ this resource and rarely provided fingerings in his pieces (except for fragments of some studies, the authorship of which at times could be ascribed to an editor), he supplied additional information to guide the positioning of the left hand on the guitar neck by means of rests, which in specific circumstances actually signal a position change.

Sor's case is probably unique in terms of the deployment of the rest to indicate position shifts. I am unable to find such a clear intention in any other composer for the classical guitar. I have confirmed this by examining a large number of Sor compositions, deliberately looking for rests that signal more information than is codified in the *legisign* for that rest. In many instances, when the placement of the fingers is not obvious, Sor's signal-rest pinpoints the appropriate moment to execute a leap or change in position and thus renders the performance of a complex stretch more fluid.

Despite the possibility of maintaining certain notes, allowing them to sound for a longer duration than that indicated (one should briefly mention that to ignore rests

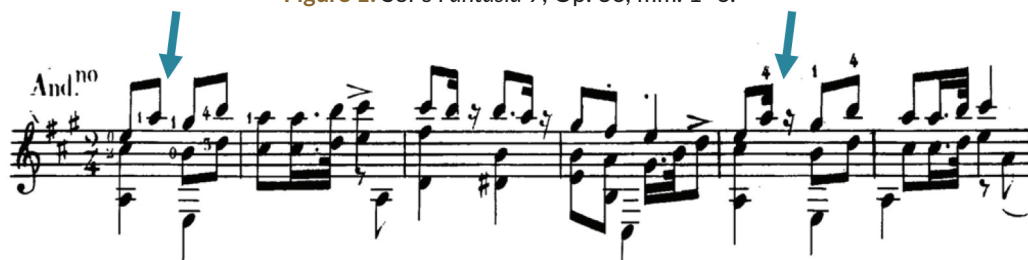
¹ My principal source regarding semiotics is Charles Sanders Peirce, *La Ciencia de la Semiótica* (Nueva Visión: Buenos Aires, 1974).

² Fernando Sor, *Método para guitarra* (1830) (Fafe: Editora Labirinto, 2009), translated to Castilian by E. Baranzano and R. Barceló.

is a very common habit among guitarists), it often pays to liberate a given finger—an action also symbolized by a rest—in order to facilitate a change in posture, with or without a leap in position, since the signal could also be taken advantage of to relax and fleetingly re-accommodate the fingers without abandoning the position. This indicates another, albeit closely related, function of the signal-rest.

To illustrate Sor's use of the signal-rest, I offer an example from his *Fantasia No. 9* for guitar, *Souvenir d'Amitié* (Remembrance of Friendship, dedicated to G. Regondi).³ In the first measure of the Andantino (**Figure 1**), the melody, E-A-G#-B, appears in eighth notes, without rests. Four measures later, when the melody repeats, Sor introduces an unexpected, articulative sixteenth-note rest, rhythmically imitating a passage that takes place two measures before. That change in note duration is accompanied by a fingering different from the one used the first time, which entails a position change (marked with a supplementary fingering indication not always present in similar situations). The articulative rests in this example suggest the need for a left-hand leap for the sake of musical expression.

Figure 1: Sor's *Fantasia 9*, Op. 36, mm. 1-6.



III. The rest and musical expression

There are several factors to be considered and which exert some influence on the execution of a *cantabile/legato/espessivo* musical part for guitar, such as the ease in preserving timbral uniformity by keeping a melody on a single string, occasionally using only one finger of the right hand to play (when such is allowed by the speed and texture of the musical passage). In this way, it is possible to obtain an even greater sonic unity, since having six strings available means having six voices/timbres. In a finger placement meant to “sing,” we can avail ourselves of the unisons on different strings and avoid loose strings, since these do not allow the realization of vibrato (or such is very difficult). Besides, it is simpler for the two hands to cut the sounds in order to articulate the notes in accordance with the demands of the music, through brief articulative rests, whether or not these are written down.

Let's now examine the first measures of a well-known study by Sor (**Figure 2**).⁴

Figure 2: Sor's Study No. 17, Op. 29, mm. 8-11.



In the first measure, right after the anacrusis, a low C appears, usually played on the fifth string with an eighth-note duration, immediately silenced by an eighth rest. Many guitarists would agree that a rest placed at that point deviates from the norm. The guitar poses difficulties in prolonging the duration of sounds. For that reason, it is not usually necessary to provide an instruction for such a quick cutting of a note, except when the function of the rest is to convey a certain articulation. But in cases

like this, we cannot say that such a rest always serves the cause of musical articulation. Here, we suspect it indicates instead a left-hand movement (especially if one considers that on the second beat of the same measure there is also a C with the duration of a quarter note): a change in

position allowing the upper *cantabile* voice to be realized on the second string, making the melodic arch more uniform in timbre and enabling the production of vibrato. This necessitates the placement of finger 1 on the second-string C, then sliding it to D, while cutting the C of the bass at almost at the same time (as in **Figure 5**, next page). Segovia, with this very purpose in mind, takes care to maintain the sequence C, D, E, F on the second string (**Figure 3**, next page) but places a bar on the fifth fret on the second beat, in order to play the E of the main voice, an option which does not facilitate legato. Several editors place finger 3 on the C of the fifth string, enabling the prolongation of this bass note, while finger 4 plays the D on the second string (**Figure 4**, next page), playing E on the open first string, which serves the legato but makes it difficult to obtain uniformity of color in the melody. In this case, the rest on the C of the fifth string can be a side effect of a

³ Brian Jeffery, ed., *Fernando Sor: The New Complete Works for Guitar Solo and Guitar Duet*, re-engraved ed., 11 vols. (London: Tecla, 2001).

⁴ Jeffery, *Sor Complete Works*.

THE MUSICAL REST: (cont.)

Figure 3: Sor's Study No. 17, Op. 29, mm. 8–11 (Segovia).⁵

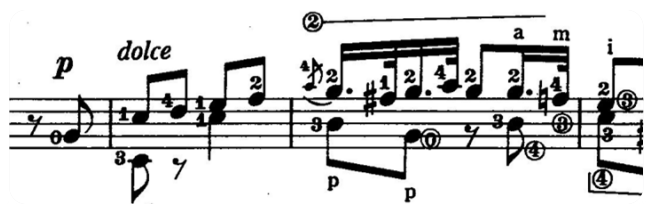
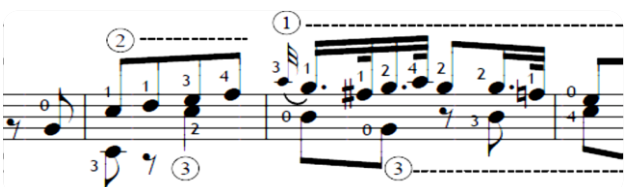


Figure 4: Sor's Study No. 17, Op. 29, mm. 9–11 (Savino).⁶



Figure 5: Sor's Study No. 17, Op. 29, mm. 8–11 (Barceló).⁷



preparatory turn of hand in order to place finger 2 on the first-string F, more than a deliberate silence. In my finger placement (**Figure 5**), I take advantage of Sor's rest (signal?) to move finger 1 from C up to D, through a discreet *portamento*, simultaneously performing the required rest and maintaining the tone color of the melody.

IV. Conclusion

The musical rest in Sor, understood as a *legisign* endowed with a multiplicity of meanings on both a musical and technical level, simultaneously encompasses two sign-functions: symbol and signal. As the latter, the rest functions as a sign that indicates some change in position of the left hand but the discernment of which falls to the interpreter's judgment. Hence, many of Sor's scores possess a translucent musical intentionality, holding more information than is apparent at first sight, especially concerning mechanical realization. In addition to the musical examples cited above, players will discover many more instances of the use of the signal-rest as it appears across the Sor oeuvre.

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⁵ Andrés Segovia, ed., *Study No. 20*, in *20 Studies for the Guitar by Fernando Sor* (New York: Edward B. Marks, 1945).

⁶ Fernando Sor, *The Complete Studies for Guitar*, Richard Savino, ed. (Heidelberg: Chanterelle Verlag, 1997).

⁷ I apply this fingering scheme, striving for legato and timbral uniformity of the melody, trying as few string shifts as possible, to that end taking advantage of the rests provided by Sor, and simultaneously making use of mechanisms that favor expressive fluidity and functional work of the hands.