Since 1994, when the second edition of Brian Jeffery’s standard biography of Fernando Sor was published, various studies have added to our knowledge and understanding of the guitarist and composer. Now a hitherto unknown letter, written by Sor in Saint Petersburg, has come to light which makes a significant addition to the array of documents pertaining to his life and work. Dated 1 April 1827, this remarkably long letter provides new insight into the publishing and personal relationship between Sor, his Paris publisher Meissonnier, and various intermediaries; it also mentions some unknown Sor works, including a book of drafts at Málaga, and some pieces mistakenly published under Sor’s name. Finally, it reveals his attitude toward the engraving by M. N. Bates of his portrait after Goubeau—the only sure pictorial record of Sor we have—and his great affection for Paris.

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Note on the text: Sor writes a passable French, though his spellings (e.g. aplaudir, defunct) sometimes depart from the current literate norm. His spellings have been retained in the transcription. Sor generally knew when a French word should carry an accent, but he almost invariably writes something indeterminate between a dot and an acute. All the accents Sor marked have been brought into line with modern usage, but none has been supplied where he omits an accent, and those that he adds unnecessarily have been retained.
—Christopher Page

1 The author is grateful to the various people who have made this study possible: first and foremost to the owner of the Sor letter, Mr. Norbert Fischer, who generously provided images of it and gave permission to publish them; furthermore to Andreas Stevens, who first announced the letter’s existence at the 6th Lake Konstanz Guitar Research Meeting (March 2017) and later put me in contact with the owner; and to Luis Briso de Montiano for valuable suggestions. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Christopher Page who, although himself planning an article on this important document, munificently had no objections to sharing it. Finally, my thanks go to Christopher Page who prepared the edition of the French text of the letter and the English translation, and whose many comments throughout my work on this article have been most encouraging.

Figure 2: Sor autograph letter of 1 April 1827, p. 2.
A NEWLY DISCOVERED LETTER: (cont.)

Figure 3: Sor autograph letter of 1 April 1827, p. 3.
Figure 4: Sor autograph letter of 1 April 1827, exterior showing addressee, postal stamps, and the customary wax seal.
Mon cher Mr. Meissonnier

J’ai reçu par Mr. Albert la somme que vous lui avez remis pour moi, et je m’occupe des autres trois airs variés ; celui de la Mère Michél est déjà fini, et je vous avoue que c’est mon bijou, je vous le remettrai moi même à la fin du mois prochain ; car ma pauvre petite femme se trouvant avoir grand besoin de repos nous avons obtenu un congé de cinq mois avec tous les appointements, et nous en passerons deux au moins à Paris.

Vous avez annoncé une collection nouvelle de mes ouvrages dans laquelle il y a une grande sonate à quatre mouvements que je ne connais nullement, à moins qu’un livre qui se trouvait à Málaga parmi ceux que j’y ai laissé n’ait été mis au jour ; mais ce livre n’étant que mon confident d’idées il n’a jamais été mon intention d’en faire la publication, et je ne puis pas m’imaginer comment vous seriez il parvenu. J’y avait commencé une grande sonate en si bemol, un autre en ut, un[’] autre en fa mineur, et un autre en sol. Je me rappelle presque de tout, et je me propose d’en faire la publication lorsque j’en aurais oté toutes les incorrections que j’y fis, dans le tems ou j’étais un tant soit peu faible harmoniste, et un peu trop guitarriste. Vous annoncez aussi mon portrait, et s’il y avait [p. 2] moyen d’en retarder la livraison, au lieu de donner au public la copie d’un mauvais portrait (car je suppose que ce ne peut être que celui dessiné par Goubeau et estropié par un mauvais graveur Anglais) on aurait celle d’un excellent portrait que je vous prêterais, et rectifié par quelque séance d’après nature. Il me semble que si vous annoncez tout simplement la chose telle qu’elle est, le public ne pourra qu’aplaudir au désir que vous lui témoignerez de lui présenter la marchandise de la meilleure qualité qu’il est possible.

J’ai arrangé pour le piano à quatre mains l’ouverture de Cendrillon et une marche triomphale composée à l’époque du Couronnement. Je ne l’ai point publiée parceque cela ne tourne point à profit dans ce pays ci lorsque les morceaux dépassent les deux pages : outre cela, comme lorsque je dédiais la marche funèbre à l’Imperatrice, elle me fit un cadeau de 2000 roubles (valeur d’une bague que Sa Majesté m’envoya), je ne pouvais publier l’autre sans la lui dédier, et je trouvais que ça avait l’air d’en demander un autre ; car elle ne pouvais moins que de faire pour un ouvrage dédié à son mari vivant ce qu’elle avait fait pour celui qui était fait pour son beau frère défunct. Peut être [p. 3] ces deux ouvrages vous conviendraient.

Je me fais une fête du plaisir de voir mes anciens amis dont vous faites partie. Présentez je vous prie mes salutations amicales à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à Cendrillon et à Made. Meissonnier et à Mr. votre frère ainsi qu’à
I have arranged for four-hand piano the overture from Cendrillon and a triumphal march composed at the time of the Coronation. I have certainly not published it because in this country there is no profit whatsoever to be got from a piece that exceeds two pages. What is more, when I dedicated the funeral march to the Empress, since she gave me a present of 2000 roubles (the value of a ring that her majesty sent me), I could not publish the other [i.e. the triumphal march] without dedicating it to her, and I found that would make it appear as if I were asking for another [present], for she could not do less for a work dedicated to her living husband than she had done for one that was made for her deceased brother-in-law. Perhaps these two works will suit you?

I rejoice to think I will see my old friends of whom you are one. Please give my friendly greetings to Madame Meissonnier and to your brother, also to Monsieur and Madame Miné. Please accept warm greetings on behalf of my wife and trust the sincere friendship of your very devoted

F. Sor.

P.S. 

I have forgotten to tell you that, among the scraps that you have been given by those who know that you like what I compose, you have been given the guitar part of a duo for guitar and flute or violin, as a sonata, and that is how you have published it; there are places which are absolutely meaningless without the other part; you have also been given two minuets which are not of my composing but are rather the work of a Monsieur Mercader from the town of Cervera in Catalonia.

COMMENTS

Although dated St. Petersburg 1 April 1827, the letter has two postal stamps (Figure 4) showing that it took a full month to reach the addressee; one stamp reads “MEMEL 29 APR…” (Memel was the old name of the Lithuanian costal town Klaipėda), the other appears to be “Mai II 1827,” which may be the date of the letter’s arrival in Paris.

It has previously been assumed that Sor returned to Paris in late 1826 or early 1827, but the letter shows that he remained somewhat longer in Russia and that he and his wife expected to be back in Paris before the end of May.

The Monsieur Albert mentioned here is the French dancer-choreographer François Décombe-Albert, whom Sor would have known from London. They cooperated in the production of the ballet Cendrillon in 1822, for which Sor composed the music and which Albert choreographed in addition to dancing a leading role. The sum must have been payment for some compositions which Sor had sent to Meissonnier, in all likelihood opp. 24–29, for which a subscription with the title Six nouveaux morceaux was advertised in the Revue Musicale of February 1827. (It is also possible, but less likely, that the money included advance payment for the “three airs with variations.”) Most probably Monsieur Albert had brought the money in person, but he could have arranged the delivery through an intermediary, perhaps a French dancer going to Russia.

The text indicates that Sor must have promised Meissonnier three new sets of airs with variations, one of which was already finished, the Mère Michel (better known as “C’est la mère Michel”), which was published in 1828 as Sor’s op. 30, with the title 7e. Fantaisie et Variations Brillantes. Of the other two sets we know nothing (they were not published by Meissonnier) unless perhaps they were op. 40, Fantaisie sur un air favori Ecossais, and op. 54, Morceau de Concert, which Sor published later in cooperation with Pacini.

“My poor little wife” (ma pauvre petite femme) was the young ballerina Félicité Hullin, whom Sor probably married in Paris before heading east with her in 1823.

The text implies that they were planning to return to Paris together for a couple of months in 1827. In Russia, Félicité most likely had been engaged with a regular salary at what would have been the Bolshoi Petrovsky Theatre in Moscow. Perhaps Sor was also employed there; his reference to their receiving “five months of paid leave” suggests that they were highly valued and that both were expected to return in the fall. But they were destined to break up their relationship; see below.

“You have announced a new collection of my works in which there is a grand sonata, in four movements…” The “new collection” most certainly refers to the Six nouveaux Morceaux de guitare, opp. 24–29, a subscription for which was advertised in the Revue Musicale in February 1827 and in the Journal général d’Annonces on 7 March 1827, i.e., a month or two before Sor’s letter.
The music has been composed in Spain two decades earlier. The sonata, op. 22 (which, although first published in 1825, had been published in France in 1823), is quite different from that of the two first movements, the style, particularly the bass. Unfortunately, no copies of these sonatas, either in their early states or revised, have been found; it is quite likely that Sor never revised them. Upon returning to Paris he may have realized that there was no longer a market (if ever there were) for such guitar music. The fact that Sor did not acknowledge the sonata, op. 25, may have implications worth considering. It seems unlikely that it indeed was one of the Malaga sonatas; the style, particularly of the two first movements, is quite different from that of other known works from his Spanish period, including the sonata, op. 22 (which, although first published in 1825, had been composed in Spain two decades earlier).

The music of op. 25 bears nevertheless the unmistakable hallmark of Sor; perhaps Meissonnier (or someone else?) put together movements from different sources, thereby constructing a grand, four-movement sonata. This may explain the unusual—and one may argue, weak—formal structure of the sonata, with just a minuet as the final movement.

Two versions of a portrait of Sor are known; one is an engraving made in London by M. N. Bates after a drawing or painting by Goubau(d), the other is a lithograph by Engelmann and Bordes in Paris, showing the same image of Sor with a guitar. The letter indicates that the Paris lithograph was new and made after the English engraving, at Meissonnier’s request. Sor was far from happy with the portrait “ruined by a bad English engraver,” and appealed to Meissonnier not to republish it, but to wait for another portrait the guitarist would lend him when back in Paris. Meissonnier did not honor this request; the lithograph was already on the market, and nothing more is known about the new portrait that Sor described. Sor’s verdict on M. N. Bate (the engraver) is perhaps unduly harsh, and may conceal a story that cannot now be reconstructed. This artist was responsible for some very capable engravings of paintings by the noted Regency artist, Adam Buck.

The triumphal march for the Coronation of the Tsar is not known to survive, unless it was an arrangement of the “Tempo di Marcia” from the first act of Sor’s ballet Hercule et Omphale, which, according to the title-page annotations of the autograph score, was performed for the first time in Moscow in 1826 for the coronation celebrations of Tsar Nicholas I. The four-hand piano arrangement of the overture from Cendrillon is also unknown, whereas a piano score of the ballet music, including the overture, survives; it was allegedly arranged by Sor himself and published in London in 1822. Meissonnier did not act on Sor’s proposal to publish the two arrangements.

The Funeral March was composed for the funeral of Tsar Alexander in March 1826. No copy of the original score for military band has survived, but there are versions.
both for solo piano and four-hand piano.\textsuperscript{17} In the letter Sor confirms what previously was known only from secondary sources: that Tsarina Alexandra, Nicholas’ wife, bestowed a very valuable ring upon him for his services.\textsuperscript{18}

\textless C09\textgreater  Meissonnier’s brother was the publisher Joseph Meissonnier, also called Meissonnier jeune. Monsieur Miné probably refers to the organist and composer Adolphe Miné (1797–1854).

\textless C10\textgreater  The postscript again shows that Meissonnier received music attributed to Sor from various questionable sources. It is, however, impossible to determine what publication Sor has in mind when he claims that Meissonnier had published, as a solo piece, the guitar part of an unknown duo for guitar and flute or violin (“sonate” here probably means just a solo piece without necessarily implying sonata form). The publication would have had to be before op. 24 but after op. 16—a work which had been published in early 1823,\textsuperscript{19} that is, during Sor’s seven- or eight-month sojourn in Paris before departing for Russia.\textsuperscript{20} However, none of the works in question has a texture suggesting a missing melody part. Perhaps a possible candidate is one of the three brief pieces from the \textit{Divertissement}, op. 23, which Meissonnier, perhaps on Sor’s request, replaced in a later issue of the publication, even though all three, a \textit{Valse}, a \textit{Minueto}, and an \textit{Allemande}, appear to be quite complete as they stand.\textsuperscript{21}

\textless C11\textgreater  It is impossible to establish the identity of these two minuets by Mercader. Other “Sor” minuets may also be spurious; according to Jeffery, a printed copy of op. 11, \textit{Deux Thèmes variés et Douze Minuets}, contains a manuscript note to the minuet no. 3, possibly in José de Lira’s hand, stating that Francisco María de Sabater claimed to have composed this piece in 1803.\textsuperscript{22} It is quite possible that the majority if not all of the Spanish-style minuets published by Meissonnier under Sor’s name, and which doubtless are early compositions (if by Sor), were acquired from persons other than Sor himself—probably as manuscript copies originating in Spain. In the introduction to his method Sor writes: “Several of these pieces [composed in Spain] would have never been exposed to the public, had I been consulted; but some persons who had copies (most of them incorrect) communicated them to the editor (publisher), who, doing far too much honor to my talents, seized with pleasure everything that bore my name.”\textsuperscript{23} Sor’s method was published two years after he ended his cooperation with Meissonnier, and the description of the unnamed, over-reaching Parisian \textit{éditeur} (publisher) in this passage fits well with what the letter tells us of Meissonnier’s business practices.

From our perspective it may seem devious for a trusted publisher to engage in such activities. Yet Sor does not show much indignation. The notion of intellectual property rights, which only gained the force of law with the Berne Convention of 1886, was little developed at this time. Copyright legislation in France and England secured the rights of the composer or publisher of a published musical work only if it had been correctly registered. The Meissonnier-Sor case was not unique; Joel Sachs has shown that Boosey in London continued to issue pirated editions of Hummel’s earlier works after he became the composer’s authorized English publisher from 1819 on, apparently without objections from Hummel.\textsuperscript{24}

There are other works by Sor deriving from his Spanish period which Meissonnier probably also acquired indirectly. They include the \textit{Thêma varié}, op. 3, the \textit{Grand solo}, op. 14, and \textit{Sonate}, op. 15; perhaps they also encompass the two variation sets included in op. 11. Op. 23 seems also not to have originated with the composer himself. Although they may all be by Sor, the music survives in versions he did not necessarily review or deem satisfactory.

\textbf{Félicité Hullin and Sor}

Although no marriage certificate is known, it is generally assumed that Sor and Félicité Hullin were married, despite their huge age difference. This is corroborated by Sor calling her “my little wife” (\textit{ma petite femme}) both in this letter and in another addressed to Monsieur Albert,\textsuperscript{25} in the latter she is also mentioned by name. Furthermore, in contemporary Russian sources and later ballet literature, she is regularly named “Hullin-Sor.” The present letter implies that in early 1827 they still had a functioning relationship, and that they were planning a journey back to Paris together for a brief sojourn. There is no indication that Sor intended to leave Russia for good, yet we know that he never returned, whereas Félicité, after

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Jeffery, \textit{Fernando Sor}, p. 81; Richard M. Long, “Fernando Sor’s Funeral March for Tsar Alexander I.” in Gasser, \textit{Sor Studies}, 63–72.
\item \textsuperscript{18} See discussion in Jeffery, \textit{Fernando Sor}, p. 81.
\item \textsuperscript{19} The \textit{Cinquième Fantaisie}, op. 16; was advertised in \textit{Le Miroir des spectacles} on 25 February 1823.
\item \textsuperscript{20} For details on this previously little-known Paris period, see Stentadvold, “Fernando Sor on the Move.”
\item \textsuperscript{21} The waltz and minuet had previously been published by Castro de Gistau, also as solo pieces.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Jeffery, \textit{Fernando Sor}, p. 25. Sabater is also mentioned briefly twice in Josep María Mangado Arrigas, \textit{La Guitarra en Cataluña 1769–1939} (London: Tecla Editions, 1998), 11–12.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Sor’s \textit{Méthod for the Spanish Guitar}, translated by A. Merrick (London, 1832), 6. Original French text: \textit{Plusieurs de ces morceaux n’auraient jamais été exposés au public si l’on n’était consulté ; mais des personnes qui en avaient des copies (la plupart incorrectes) en font usage avec l’éditeur, qui, faisant beaucoup trop d’honneur à mon talent, s’amusaient avec plaisir de tout ce qui portait mon nom.} (Sor, \textit{Méthode}, 4.)
\item \textsuperscript{24} As Hummel had lost the opportunity for English copyright of those early works, he had no complaints about this activity; on the contrary, in a letter of 1824, he wrote that he had never found reason to be dissatisfied with Boosey. (Joel Sachs, “Authentic English and French Editions of J.N. Hummel,” \textit{Journal of the American Musical Society} 25 (Summer 1972): 207.)
\item \textsuperscript{25} Reproduced in Jeffery, \textit{Fernando Sor}, 79–80.
\end{itemize}
some months, went back and remained in Russia the rest of her professional life. (She is credited with a profound influence on the Moscow ballet tradition.) So they must have separated. What is more, in the detailed Sor article in Ledhuy’s *Encyclopédie Pittoresque* of 1835, considered to be partly autobiographical, there is no mention of her whatsoever, although Sor’s journey to Russia and the success he had there with his ballets are amply covered. This cannot be a mere oversight; it rather demonstrates that he no longer wanted to be associated with her in any way.

There is further evidence of this. The Bibliothèque de l’Opera in Paris holds the autograph scores of two Sor ballets: *Alphonse et Léonore ou l’Amant Peintre* and *Hercule et Omphale*. They stem from his Moscow period; *Alphonse et Léonore* has a title-page note, also in Sor’s hand, that it was performed there in 1824, while *Hercule et Omphale* has a similar note that it was first performed for the coronation of Tsar Nicholas in 1826. (Sor must have brought the scores with him back to Paris or had them sent when he decided to remain in France.) The title pages of both scores name Mademoiselle Hullin as the choreographer of the ballet, and she is listed among the dancers who performed in the various numbers. It is conspicuous that she is always called “Mademoiselle,” which is odd indeed if she was married to Sor. But a closer look reveals that her name has been altered throughout. In Figure 5 one can clearly see an erasure overwritten by “Mademoiselle,” although here and in most other places we can only guess what had been obliterated.

However, in the list of dancers for *Alphonse et Léonore* there is one occasion were the erasure is not overwritten. Here we can discern her original name, “Sor-Hullin,” relatively clearly, even in the reproduction shown in Figure 6. From this it is possible to establish that, in the other cases, her name was probably originally written as “Made. Sor-Hullin” and that Sor, in order to fill the empty space left by the erasure of “Sor-,” wrote “Mademoiselle” out in full instead of using the common abbreviation “Mlle.”

A severe split or rupture must have occurred in the Sor-Hullin relationship, probably during those summer months of 1827 before Félicité returned to Russia—a split so distressing that Sor later did all he could to literally blot her name out of his life. Thanks to the new information provided in the letter of 1 April 1827, we now can infer a little more about the timing of the breakup and the circumstances surrounding it.

![Figure 6](image6.png)