

**Van Vliet, Ari.**

*Napoléon Coste: Composer and Guitarist in the Musical Life of 19th-Century Paris.* Zwolle: Cumuli Foundation, 2015. 2 vols.



Emerson once proclaimed that there was no history, only biography. He might well have been commenting on the present state of musicological research into the seminal first century of the classical guitar. This era, roughly 1775–1875, is finally receiving the sort of detailed scholarly attention it merits, but mostly in the form of biographical monographs rather than surveys or summations.

Biography is a genre that lends itself well to academic theses and dissertations, and many of these biographies were so conceived. The first wave began in the 1970s with theses on Mauro Giuliani and Leonhard von Call by Thomas Heck (1970) and Alois Mauerhofer (1974) respectively. Brian Jeffery’s study of Fernando Sor—not his dissertation—was published by Tecla Editions in 1977.<sup>1</sup> The following decades saw more studies of a scholarly bent,<sup>2</sup> as well as important catalogues and/or compilations of the complete or collected works of Sor, Giuliani, Aguado, Coste, Molitor, Paganini, Diabelli, Sychra, and Zani de Ferranti. Biographical studies also appeared in various journals, notably the Italian journal *il ‘Fronimo,’* (founded by the late Ruggiero Chiesa in 1972) which continues to be an invaluable source for guitar history.

Looking back on the last half-century of such scholarship, it is amazing how research has been transformed by technology. In the 1970s this sort of research involved a great deal of travel to libraries and collections (often quite fun—*Ed.*) followed by hours of poring over hand-written ledgers, card catalogues, and dusty music periodicals. Photocopy machines were scarce and microfilming, when available, was expensive. The discovery of personal records such as actual birth and death documents was a significant achievement, and often corrected erroneous information in the standard secondary sources (Van Vliet notes that he found eight different birth dates and seven death dates for Coste in various sources!). Each successive decade has seen technological advances—searchable data bases, computerized card catalogues, digitized journals and public records—that have transformed research procedures. Recent biographical studies, for example, usually contain detailed accounts of concerts performed in remote venues and reviewed in provincial gazettes, now discoverable through internet searches. Such details can be invaluable in chronicling musicians’ travels, concert activity, and repertoires.

Ari Van Vliet’s new study, *Napoléon Coste: Composer and Guitarist in the Musical Life of 19th-Century Paris* (Zwolle: Cumuli Foundation, 2015), benefits greatly from

this progress in research methodology. Like many of the studies mentioned above, this two-volume work began as Van Vliet’s eight-hundred page thesis at the University of Utrecht, now available online (in the original Dutch) in PDF format.<sup>3</sup> It is an ambitious, exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) study that mingles biography and a fascinating picture of the cultural milieu—19th-century Paris—with descriptions of the music that the composer was producing in each epoch of his life. Van Vliet follows all of this with an analysis of Coste’s compositions in detail that is unprecedented in guitar scholarship. He even includes a CD of himself performing a sampling of Coste’s works for solo guitar. The first volume is also profusely illustrated with maps, photographs, etc.

Van Vliet’s organizational strategy is complex, somewhat reminiscent of John Dos Passos’ experimental trilogy *U.S.A.*, which intermingled chapters of narrative with historical background. It also reminded me of Anthony Burgess’ retelling of the life of Napoléon Bonaparte in a novel organized after the four movements of a Beethoven symphony. Van Vliet begins with a “Prelude” outlining his methodology and listing his principal sources. This is followed by eight chapters based on the events of Coste’s life, named for musical works composed during each period, interspersed with two *intermezzi* that illuminate the historical and cultural milieu in which he lived, followed by a ninth chapter summation entitled “Finale.”

Chapter I, “Introduction,” establishes the historical and geographical settings of Coste’s early life, including a map of the region and color photographs of the picturesque waterfall evoked musically in *La Source du Lyson*, Op. 47. Chapter II, “Caprice,” provides many new insights regarding Coste’s birth (carefully documented) and childhood. Coste’s father was a soldier in the Grande Armée of Napoléon I; Coste was born in a year of great victories and was named for the Emperor. As a child, he accompanied his father when the latter was stationed in the Kingdom of Holland during the ill-fated campaigns of 1813–14. Several of Coste’s *Souvenirs* are descriptive pieces of Dutch locations (*Delfzil* and *La Zuyderzée*, Opp. 19–20) that are apparently based on the composer’s childhood memories of those visits. Chapter III, “Thème varié,” discusses his youth and early concerts, including one with the young touring virtuoso Luigi Sagrini in 1828.

Next comes the first “Intermezzo,” which is dedicated to a broad description of the rich musical life in Paris in the critical years from the Revolution through the Romantic era, including the concert world, the venues, the critics, the publishers, the Conservatory and other institutions, guitar methods (130 of these were published in France in the century 1758–1857, all but one in the city of Paris!), and the *guitaromanie* phenomenon—all compressed and

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summarized in twenty dense pages. Van Vliet is thorough and his enthusiasm is contagious as we learn that chlorine bleaching of sheep gut improved the sound of guitar strings or that tuning forks were set by law to  $a^4=435$  Hz.

Coste moved from the provinces to the capital in 1829. Chapter IV, “Aux parisiens,” paints a remarkable picture of musical life in the Paris of Liszt, Chopin, and Berlioz, where his neighbors included the critic Fétis and the publisher Richault. Coste was an instant success in a city that already knew the guitar well. He shared concerts with Sor, Moscheles, Malibran, and Panseron and was the dedicatee of Carulli’s *Duo concertant*, Op. 328, and Sor’s *Souvenir de Russie*, Op. 63. Coste dedicated his own *Le Tornoï*, Op. 15, to Berlioz, who played guitar, taught at the Conservatory, and wrote the *Symphonie fantastique* in 1830. Van Vliet intersperses reviews of Coste’s (and others’) concerts with detailed descriptions of his contemporaneous compositions and those of the great musical figures with whom he was associating and performing. Van Vliet quotes from the reviews of Castil-Blaze, who hated the guitar, and Fétis, who never seemed to make up his mind about it. Other anecdotes: Coste and the luthier Lacôte feuded over royalties for the sales of the heptachord guitar they developed; when Legnani injured himself prior to a much anticipated performance, Sor and Aguado stepped in to save the concert and preserve Legnani’s fee. I would observe here that the fall of the Bourbons in the July Revolution in 1830 probably paved the way for Coste’s early successes in Paris; in the previous decades the Bourbons had suppressed the careers of guitarists who opposed them, and would not have looked with favor on a composer whose *prénom* was “Napoléon.”

In Chapter V, “Souvenirs,” Van Vliet continues the narrative through the years 1840–1859, interspersing many more reviews from the contemporaneous press with digressions and anecdotes regarding the critics, Halévy’s opera *Le Guitarrero*, program music, the French fascination with Spain, a description of the Sor-Coste *Method*, and the composer’s relations with the Danish amateur Søffren Degen, whose library (now in the Kongelige Bibliotek in Copenhagen) and some of his correspondence (in the Statsbiblioteket in Århus) were important sources for this book. The key event in Chapter VI, “Grande Sérénade,” is the Nikolai Makaroff competition in Brussels in 1856. Makaroff clearly favored Mertz, but the latter’s death meant that the first prize had to be awarded to him posthumously. Coste, who won the second prize, was thus acclaimed as the greatest living guitar composer.

Intermezzo II provides a description of the transformation of both the city of Paris and of French society that took place after the convulsions of the mid-19th century. Van Viet provides a vivid and detailed context

for the next, final years of Coste’s career. Occasionally the historical details are confused, such as when the famous barricades of the Bloody June Days are moved from 1848 to 1851, but such complaints are minor amid welcome digressions on the dedicatees of guitar music, the luthiery business, and the decline of the musical press and periodicals.

Chapter VII, “Etudes de genre,” covers the time from Coste’s return from Brussels to the momentous years 1871–72, which saw the collapse of the Second Empire in the Franco-Prussian War, the siege of Paris, and the ill-fated Commune. In 1863, a serious fracture of his left arm almost ended Coste’s career (He injured the same arm again in 1874). Van Vliet also discusses Coste’s music for oboe, and the famous *Etudes*, Op. 38, are analyzed in detail.

Chapter, “Divagation,” deals with Coste’s last decade, 1873–83. Coste married in 1872 and his rearrangement of Sor’s *L’Encouragement*, Op. 34 (1879), for two equal guitarists was probably intended to be performed with his wife. His popular anthology of arrangements, the *Livre d’or du guitariste*, Op. 52 (1880), contained nine works by Robert de Visée that Coste transcribed from the Baroque guitar tablature (six more had also been included in the Sor-Coste *Method*). These transcriptions date to well before Chilesotti’s *Da un Codice Lauten-Buch* and *Lautenspieler* appeared in print, giving Coste claim to being a pioneer of the Early Music movement from which 20th-century guitarists have derived so much repertory. By the time Coste died, Regondi, Zani de Ferranti, Legnani, and Huerta had also died, severing the last direct connections to the first great generation of guitarists. It is intriguing to imagine that Coste, an avid concert-goer, might have attended the 1881 Paris recital of Francisco Tárrega.

Chapter IX, “Finale,” is a summary of what has gone before as well as an assessment of Coste’s reputation in the century after his death. There is also a detailed summary of the composer’s use of various formal and stylistic devices such as cadenzas, ornaments, *idée fixe*, onomatopœia, and so on. This is followed by over a hundred pages of descriptive analyses of all the works mentioned in the previous chapters, in chronological order, with incipits and occasionally extended examples. These, in turn, are followed by various appendices: chronological charts, lists, an exhaustive bibliography, facsimiles of important documents, and an index. And all of the above (389 pages) was just the first volume!

Volume II is a 285-page *Thematic Catalogue* of all of Coste’s works, including his transcriptions and arrangements, with numerous incipits, examples, and detailed analyses of the various formal and stylistic devices mentioned above. Plus, there are many appendices and tables (25 pages) enumerating the use of these devices in spreadsheet format, often with graphs.

Van Vliet concludes that Coste was the most significant of those he considers the three great guitarist/composers in the age of Romanticism—Coste, Mertz, and Zani de Ferranti.<sup>4</sup> Gleaning consistently favorable reviews well into the *Belle époque*, Coste enjoyed a career that kept the concert guitar alive (or at least visible) well into the age of large symphony orchestras, grand pianos, and opera. Coste is certainly worthy of re-evaluation and serious scholarly study, but while his works deserve to be heard more often in recitals, they were never entirely forgotten. Several of his works have remained almost constantly in print (the *Études*, the *Livre d'or*) and others have entered the standard repertory without always giving him credit (his equal-guitar arrangements of Sor duos and his revisions of Sor *Studies* that were published by Segovia).

The Coste revival began in the 1980s when Simon Wynberg edited the nine-volume *Guitar Works of Napoléon Coste* (Monaco: Éditions Chanterelle S. A., 1981–83). David Russell and others soon added several pieces to their concert repertoires, and recordings followed. A brief search of the internet reveals five CDs of Coste's works in a Naxos *Guitar Works* series, performed by Jeffery MacFadden, Marc Teicholz, Pavel Steidl, and Frédéric Zigante. (Full disclosure: I wrote the sleeve notes to these, which Van Vliet's work has now rendered obsolete.) There are also notable Coste recordings by Marco Riboni, Philippe Villa, Raphaëlla Smits, Jean Vallières, Flávio Apro, and John Schneiderman. The CD accompanying Van Vliet's book joins this list with a well-considered selection of the composer's most significant and characteristic works,<sup>5</sup> performed by the author on a Bernhard Kresse copy of Coste's seven-string Lacôte guitar. One of these pieces is an overdue first recording of the *Fantaisie symphonique* that Coste composed for the Makaroff competition in 1856.

Ari Van Vliet has produced a major work of scholarship that will not soon be superseded. It is set in a readable sans-serif typeface, printed on high-quality A4 paper, and sturdily bound with attractive glossy hard covers. It is not perfect, of course. The narrative makes frequent excursions into the historical present tense; perhaps this works better in the original Dutch but it seems idiosyncratic in English. The translation is occasionally awkwardly unidiomatic ("third guitar" instead of "terz guitar") and the typos and proofreading errors are also numerous (e.g., Sor and Coste did not play a concert together in 1938). But dwelling on such details seem petty when balanced against a book that is so meticulously researched, imaginatively organized, judiciously reasoned, and richly illustrated. It is the magisterial modern biography that Napoléon Coste and the guitar have deserved.

—RICHARD LONG

<sup>1</sup> I did not include William Gray Sasser's earlier dissertation on Sor (1960) because it is more a study of his works than a biography. Likewise, Josef Zuth's *Simon Molitor und die wiener Gitarristik (um 1800)* (Vienna: Anton Goll, n.d. but 1920) actually contains only a scant ten pages of biography, which Zuth used as a key to unlock the phenomenon of the guitar in Vienna at the turn of the 19th century. Thomas Heck adopted a similar effective strategy in his 1970 Giuliani dissertation, as does Van Vliet with Paris in the work reviewed here.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, biographical studies of Joseph Küffner (1985), Ferdinando Carulli (1988), Marco Aurelio Zani de Ferranti (1989), and Caspar Joseph Mertz (1989) were completed by Mathias Henke, Mario Torta, Simon Wynberg, and Astrid Stempnik respectively. (Unfortunately, the Carulli biographical profile in Torta's 1988 dissertation was not included in the subsequently published thematic catalogue of 1993.) The trend continued in the new millennium with studies of Dionisio Aguado by Pompeyo Pérez Díaz (2003), Anton Diabelli by Jukka Savijoki (2004), Zani de Ferranti by Marcus Van de Cruys (2005), Adam Darr by Joseph Costello (2005), A. T. Huerta by Javier Suárez-Pájeares and Robert Coldwell (2006), Mauro Giuliani by Marco Riboni (2011), Francesco Molino by Mario Dell'Ara (2014), and Luigi Legnani by Sergio Monaldini (2015). A brief but useful biography of Coste published in his hometown for his bicentenary is worth mentioning here: Noël Roncet, *Napoléon Coste: Compositeur, 1805–1883* (Amondans, 2005; reprinted by Tecla in 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Napoléon Coste: componist en gitarist in het muziekleven van het 19e-eeuwse Parijs—Biografie, Thematische Catalogus ... (with a Summary in English) ...*, (Utrecht, 2015). <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/311446>

<sup>4</sup> I agree with this assessment, but must note that his list is debatable. Zani wrote some works of stunning virtuosity that are mostly unknown today because they require open–E major *scordatura*. Also (earlier, on page 183), Van Vliet appears to be unaware of some important works by Regondi, notably the *Ten Études*, first published in 1990, and several recent manuscript discoveries.

<sup>5</sup> The CD contains the complete *Souvenirs: Sept morceaux épisodiques* (Opp. 17–23), *Le Passage des Alpes* (Opp. 27, 28, and 40), as well as the *Fantaisie symphonique*, Op. 28b.

**Boccherini, Luigi. *Sinfonia concertante* (G. 523). Edited by Matanya Ophee. Ohio: Columbus, Ohio: Editions Orphée, 2016.**

Luigi Boccherini's *Sinfonia concertante* for orchestra with guitar obbligato, G. 523 (1799), was one of several arrangements the composer made from his Concerto in C, Op. 7, G. 491, completed three decades earlier. Another adaptation was his String Quintet, Op. 10, No. 4, G. 268 (1771), which in turn inspired a string quartet arrangement attributed to Haydn. The *Sinfonia* survives in an autograph manuscript in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra in Paris; the title page stipulates that it was composed for the Marquis de Benavent and scored for "due Violini principali, due di ripieni, Oboe, Chitarra, Viola, Corni, Fagotto, Violoncello obbligati e Basso." The Marquis de Benavent was a wealthy amateur who commissioned at least some of the composer's guitar quintets at about the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the guitar's long struggle to gain recognition as a concert instrument with a credible repertory, it is remarkable that a performing edition of a significant work with an obbligato guitar part—especially one written by a famous composer—has remained unpublished until now. It is appropriate that this edition of the piece has ultimately been published by Matanya Ophee, who has championed guitar chamber music for decades