

REVIEW

## *Guitar Etudes in the Lisztian Vein*

Zanon Plays Mignone's Twelve Etudes

DIOGO ALVAREZ

*Francisco Mignone: 12 Etudes for Guitar*

Fabio Zanon, guitar

GuitarCoop, 2022. 1 CD\*



THE GUITAR is notorious for its idiomatic demands. Therefore, composers writing for it are often faced with a challenge—to write music that fits the instrument well and sounds fluid and organic, while avoiding the sameness of all-too-often-used gestures and patterns. The most celebrated works written for the guitar tend to be ones that succeed in striking this balance. Because these pieces are not audibly alien to the instrument but do not sound obvious to an

informed listener, they allow us to focus on the musical material alone.

Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why Francisco Mignone's series of Twelve Etudes has been receiving so much attention lately—no fewer than four complete recordings of the work have been released in the past two years. These are pieces that reflect the composer's proficiency in incorporating diverse influences and employing them in the construction of an individual style. Mignone (1897–1986), a Brazilian composer of Italian descent, was the son of a musician father. Having started his musical education at an early age and studied both in São Paulo and Milan, he developed a refined compositional technique while surrounded by music of varied genres—from the Romantic style of his Italian background to Brazilian popular music

\* This album is not available through most standard retail outlets. It is available on CD from the record label, GuitarCoop ([guitarcoop.com.br](http://guitarcoop.com.br)), but for delivery only in Brazil. Outside Brazil, the CD is available through Guitar Salon International ([guitarsalon.com](http://guitarsalon.com)). Alternatively, it is available internationally through GuitarCoop as a digital download.



Francisco Mignone in 1972. Brazilian National Archives, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

from both rural and urban areas. In the last stages of his career, he even worked with such avant-garde compositional processes as serialism, atonality, and polytonality.

The Twelve Etudes for Guitar, written in 1970, are representative of the composer's mature period. While no hint of the atonality of the 1960s can be found in these very tonal and modal pieces, the eclecticism that characterizes Mignone's late works is here woven together by his outstanding technique and creativity. The Etudes are unmistakably Brazilian and guitaristic, and they often give out a sense of comfortable familiarity (especially to those who, like me, grew up listening to Brazilian guitar music). And yet, they are *not* commonplace — Mignone's inventiveness and skill never allow interest to fade. The aforementioned balance between idiom and novelty seems hardly a challenge to Mignone, and his creative solution to it is a pleasure to listen to.

IT IS OF COURSE excellent news that four complete recordings of the Etudes (by Fabio Zanon, Cyro Delvizio, Andrea Monarda, and Francisco Luz) have been added to the previously existing two (Flávio Apro and Carlos Barbosa-Lima); especially considering that one of these releases comes from Italy, which indicates that Mignone's music is becoming better known outside Brazil as well. Equally important, however, is the fact that one of these new recordings was made by Fabio Zanon — the leading exponent of classical guitar performance in Brazil today. For one thing, the album's impact will encourage the inclusion of Mignone's Etudes in the repertoire of young

guitarists in Brazil. But beyond that, Zanon's recording is likely to become a frame of reference for the interpretation of these etudes by guitarists worldwide (together with the 1978 first recording by Barbosa-Lima, to whom these etudes are dedicated).

Zanon's recordings and performances throughout his career have not focused on a specific niche of the classical guitar repertoire, rather displaying his versatility as a musician. His continuous engagement with and defense of Brazilian guitar music, however, certainly grant him the title of expert in the field. Zanon's performance on the album reflects not only his intimacy with Mignone's musical style, but also his in-depth knowledge of the history of Brazilian guitar. In his 148-episode radio series on the history of the guitar in Brazil (*O violão brasileiro*, part of the program *Violão — com Fabio Zanon*, broadcast by Cultura FM), Zanon produced an invaluable source of information and insight on the music of Brazilian composers, even though the program was not aimed solely at musicians. Two episodes of the series are dedicated exclusively to Mignone, the first of which focuses on the Twelve Etudes. Zanon also made the premiere recording of Mignone's Guitar Concerto, and he has been arguing for the quality and importance of this music for years. His expertise is what permits such a nuanced and organic understanding of the works as heard in the album. Furthermore, because of Zanon's technical mastery of the instrument, we can hear these challenging pieces with such fluency, energy, and attention to detail that are rarely found in other performances.

MIGNONE'S Twelve Etudes are well deserving of attention by themselves, but it feels impossible not to comment on how they compare to the much more widely acclaimed Twelve Etudes by Heitor Villa-Lobos. There are several elements drawing these etudes together (some more relevant than others)—the composers' nationality and period of activity, the instrumentation, the genre of composition, the number of etudes, their nationalistic influences. A closer look at these elements, however, reveals important differences between the works. The composers' nationalistic influences, for example, while occasionally coming from similar sources, are ultimately distinct in nature—while Villa-Lobos relied more heavily on the influence of *choro* and the emulation of musical elements from Brazil's indigenous peoples, Mignone's attention was often drawn to Brazilian music of African roots and that of the rural backlands. In the same way, although the composers shared most of their period of activity, the composition of these works was separated by nearly half a century: Villa-Lobos's series was written in the 1920s; Mignone composed his in 1970. I emphasize the distance in time between the works not because they are strikingly different in style (after all, Mignone's Etudes revisit the nationalism of the early twentieth century), but to point out the different moment in each composer's respective career. Villa-Lobos was in his thirties when he started writing his Twelve Etudes, and he was trying to work out how to reconcile Brazilian and European influences in his music. Mignone, on the other hand, was in his seventies, and one can hear the composer's full maturity in these works. Even the place of each work in regard to the genre of guitar etudes differs significantly. Zanon, in his radio program and more briefly in the album booklet, compares Mignone's series to Liszt's idea of etudes, while Villa-Lobos

would generally be more aligned to Chopin's model. In other words, in Villa-Lobos we find several etudes with a single texture throughout, exploring one element of the guitar technique; but in Mignone, each etude displays a range of textures and colors, thus requiring the combination of different technical elements. Zanon does not, of course, imply that this applies to every single etude in the two series, but his assessment is illustrative of the basic premises of each composer's take on the genre.

The hourlong album consists of the Twelve Etudes for Guitar, which are framed by two short compositions that are heavily influenced by Brazilian popular music—*Lenda sertaneja* (Legend from the Backlands) and *Brazilian Song*. The etudes are performed in numeric order, and they work quite well this way, providing a sense of both continuity and variation.

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING TRAITS of Mignone's writing for the guitar is how naturally and effortlessly new musical ideas seem to arise in his works. His craft is one that hardly ever draws the listener's attention to form—it all sounds like a fluid discourse, and rarely do abrupt changes of sections occur. At the same time, however, truly contrasting textures and musical ideas occur quite often, but they emerge smoothly from the preceding material in a display of compositional prowess.

The pieces in the album display a number of strategies to achieve such fluidity in discourse. In some etudes, such as the seventh and eighth, sections are not clearly defined at all. Instead, the listener is presented with musical ideas that all seem to belong together. Nonetheless, the lack of major changes in character or texture in these pieces does not lead to monotony—Mignone's seemingly inexhaustible creativity allows for a continuously interesting listening experience. In the eighth Etude, Zanon's decision to keep an unchanging tempo for most of the piece is not only stylistically appropriate, given its roots in Brazilian popular music, but also essential to the effectiveness of the piece. By not drawing the listeners' attention to any specific moment in the performance, he allows us to keep up with its well-placed syncopations and sudden changes of color and dynamics. In other words, by not imposing himself on the music, Zanon highlights the real interest of this Etude—its rhythmic playfulness.

At the very end of Etude no. 8, the piece's exploration of a consistent rhythmic and harmonic idea falls apart, giving way to a surprising coda, which features new musical ideas. Contrasting codas such as this one are also found in other etudes, like numbers 3, 4, and 5. Mignone often makes use of the intensity of a piece's finale to fit in music that could otherwise feel out of place.

Etudes with clearly marked contrasting sections also make use of tension in order to introduce new material. In no. 4, an energetic first section exploring the range of the guitar almost in its entirety gives way to an expressive middle section, where the piece's initial sense of urgency disappears completely and movement is reduced to a minimum. This absolute shift in character and texture, however, feels almost inevitable, as if the second section was a mere consequence of the first. That impression is achieved via an increase in tension at the end of the first section, which is unleashed

in a short, three-measure intermezzo, leading to the quiet middle section. Its stillness and contemplation, brought forward by a low-register melody with plenty of repeated notes and a nearly unchanging two-note accompaniment, feels like a well-deserved breather after the intensity of the previous material. The return to the opening section is accomplished in a very similar manner—Mignone increases the activity of the initially delicate accompaniment of the middle section, then transforms the calm one-note melody into more brilliant octaves, thus guiding the listener towards the recapitulation. Zanon's playing here showcases the piece's varying character—his performance is as fluid and energetic as it should be in the ferocious first section, and he transitions to exquisite lyricism with ease when it is asked for.

In the fifth Etude, Mignone utilizes an underlying *tresillo* pattern, a syncopated figure in duple meter (related to the habanera rhythm) that is ubiquitous in its many variations in Brazilian music, as the main unifying element throughout a formally intriguing piece. Zanon comments that this piece is a sort of palindrome, due to its arch form—a melodic central section (in which an extensive melody is played both in the lower and the upper registers) is framed by two very similar sections of contemplative material, which are in turn also framed by an introduction and a coda. While the coda is not a reprise of the introduction, presenting instead new material, it still recalls elements from the introduction, therefore completing the piece's quasi-symmetrical form.

The sorrowful tenth and eleventh Etudes stand out from the other pieces in the album for their more romantic tendencies and often less predictable harmonies. Here, Mignone borrows elements from important works by Chopin and Liszt, as pointed out by Zanon. In no. 10, the initial ascending interval and the repeated chords resemble Chopin's famous E-minor Prelude, op. 28 no. 4. The dramatic interruption of the accompaniment immediately preceding the recapitulation of the opening material is also present in both Chopin's and Mignone's pieces. No. 11's three-note descending arpeggio in the bass is reminiscent of Liszt's *La lugubre gondola* no. 1 (i.e., the one in 6/8). The dark, foggy atmosphere of these two etudes differs from that of the previous ones, which are generally much lighter, and thus provides the listener with renewed interest towards the end of the cycle.

The works that open and close the album are also nationalistic in character, and they exist in different versions. *Lenda sertaneja* (Legend from the Backlands), the first piece in the album, provides a good introduction to its musical landscape. Originally composed for piano, this is a delicate piece with repetitive harmonic and rhythmic patterns that make time stand still. Nevertheless, the "legend" in the title appears as dreamlike figuration, evoking the supernatural elements that are representative of Brazilian folklore—the first example in the recording of Mignone's fluid incorporation of disparate musical elements.

The album's closing piece, *Brazilian Song*, can also be found in a version for two guitars titled *Canção sertaneja* (Song from the Backlands). It is perhaps the least ambitious composition in the album. That is not, of course, a disparaging comment on the piece—it does exactly what it aims to do and does it well. It is an excellent

representation of Mignone's Brazilian musical influences in their purest form. After all, as Zanon himself writes in the album's booklet, "Mignone considered the guitar an instrument of serenades"—or at least he did so initially, that is before getting in touch with some of Brazil's best concert guitarists of the time. In the album, *Brazilian Song* works almost as an encore, a mouthful of dessert after a thirteen-course meal, or, more akin to Brazilian culture, a tiny cup of sugary coffee after lunch.

MIGNONE'S WRITING FOR THE GUITAR emphasizes the plurality of his influences, and he often plays with contrasts, but he hardly ever does so by juxtaposing or separating them. In fact, the boundaries between sections in these pieces are nearly always connected by elision, and contrasting elements in general are incorporated into the fabric of familiar material. That, however, presents a challenge for the interpreter, as it requires a wide dynamic range, a fine control of color, tempo, and articulation, as well as the ability to change character in an instant. On top of these difficulties, some of the etudes are also very technically demanding, with nos. 4 and 12 being outright virtuoso pieces.

Zanon, however, thrives in the challenge, accomplishing a multifaceted and technically flawless interpretation of these works. His recording shows that, though demanding, Mignone's Etudes are extremely effective as concert repertoire. More than that, they are representative of the composer's masterful artistry and his diverse influences, and worthy of further exploration both by performers and scholars. Mignone's guitar music will certainly reach an even larger audience with this album and hopefully reap the benefits of long-overdue acknowledgment and appreciation from the guitar community.



### *About the Author*

DIOGO ALVAREZ is a Brazilian guitarist and researcher in music theory and musicology. He holds two degrees in classical guitar performance, a bachelor's from Universidade do Estado de Minas Gerais, Brazil, and a master's from the University of Denver. In 2016, he finished a transcription with commentary of Josquin des Prez's *Missa la sol fa re mi* for solo guitar. His research addresses large-scale rhythmic structures in Renaissance music, the music of nineteenth-century guitarist-composer Fernando Sor, the guitar music of Tōru Takemitsu, and Schenkerian analysis.

### *About Soundboard Scholar*

SOUNDBOARD SCHOLAR is the peer-reviewed journal of the Guitar Foundation of America. Its purpose is to publish guitar research of the highest caliber. *Soundboard Scholar* is online and open access. To view all issues of the journal, visit [soundboardscholar.org](http://soundboardscholar.org).

*About the Guitar Foundation of America*



THE GUITAR FOUNDATION OF AMERICA inspires artistry, builds community, and promotes the classical guitar internationally through excellence in performance, literature, education, and research. For more information, visit [guitarfoundation.org](http://guitarfoundation.org).