

REPertoire

RAPHAEL FEUILLATRE

Variations On A Theme By Sor (Llobet)

A decorative red wavy line with a scalloped edge, positioned below the main title.

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“IF YOU CAN PLAY SOMETHING FAST, PLAY IT FAST, BUT IF SOMETHING IS VERY HARD, TAKE YOUR TIME. THE MORE YOU PREPARE YOUR DIFFICULTIES, THE MORE COMFORTABLE YOU’LL BE ON STAGE.”

LESSON DESCRIPTION



In this lesson, Raphael Feuillatre analyzes Variations on a Theme by Sor, written by Miguel Llobet. He first provides some background that links this piece all the way to the Renaissance, and some information about the significance of the chord sequence. Raphael goes through the theme and each variation very methodically, highlighting both the challenges and the opportunities that each one provides.

In addition to fingerings and hand positions, Raphael very thoroughly talks down the timing of each transition, interpretive elements like dynamics and tempo, and tricks to differentiate the variations from one another. This piece is a challenge for even a more advanced guitarist, yet touches on many fundamental principles. We hope there is something for everyone to gain in this lesson!





ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR



Raphaël Feuillâtre started classical guitar lessons at the age of nine. In 2015, he was accepted to Paris National Superior Conservatory of Music and Dance (CNSMDP) into the class of Roland Dyens. He is currently working on his Master's Degree in Classical Guitar Performance with Tristan Manoukian. Simultaneously, Raphaël is taking classes with Judicaël Perroy, who plays a very important role in his artistic development.

Winner of the highly prestigious competition Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) in 2018, Raphaël is preparing the recording of his second opus (Naxos Label, 2019) and a six month tour around USA and Canada, as well as Mexico and Japan during 2019-2020 season.

OUTLINE

1. Introduction
2. Theme
3. Variation 1
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5. Variation 3
6. Variation 4
7. Variation 5
8. Variation 6
9. Intermezzo
10. Variation 7
11. Variation 8
12. Variation 9
13. Variation 10



INTRODUCTION

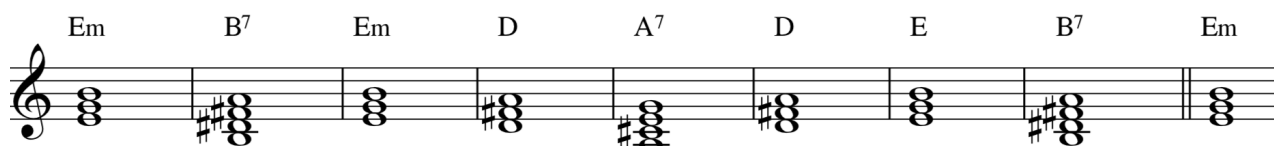


For this lesson, Raphael is joining us from a famous guitar shop in Paris called “Guitarreria”, which he encourages you to visit if you ever find yourself in the city.



The Variaciones Sobre Un Tema de Sor, Op. 15 was written in 1908 by the famous guitar virtuoso and composer Miguel Llobet. Raphael breaks down this piece, showing you a few exercises and his tips for improving your performance. As Llobet was an amazing guitarist himself, this piece is designed to push you both technically and musically, so it’s a great piece for those looking for a challenge!

The theme to this piece was inspired by a popular dance from the 15th century called La Folía (or “folies d'Espagne”), one of the oldest European musical themes still played today. The dance was performed in the streets during public events or concert spectacles, and was known for being noisy and wild. Today, the word *folia*, in Portuguese, still refers to lively and noisy festivities. Some of this energy is carried over into the musical theme. The sequence of chords in this theme is based around a specific sequence of chords in E minor. It’s important to know and recognize this sequence as it appears throughout the piece:



As you can see from the title, the composition is based on a theme by the famous Spanish composer Fernando Sor who was active around the same time as Beethoven (early 19th century). The first two variations of this piece are actually also Sor's writing - Llobet added the proceeding eight variations as well as the romantic "Intermezzo" in between.

At the end of the introduction, Raphael warns against making this piece sound like an extended exercise. Even though the piece is quite technical, keep in mind that it was written as a romantic piece. Make sure you take time to set up each variation and give them all, even the virtuosic ones, the musical attention they deserve.

Raphael suggests listening to other theme and variations, such as Beethoven's 32 Variations in C minor, to study ways of elegantly connecting one variation to another.

THEME

The theme is supposed to sound easy and beautiful, but as Raphael points out, it's actually one of the hardest parts of the piece. This is due to the difficulty of playing legato on the guitar. In order to maintain the lines between the chords, you need to develop a fast attack so that your right hand fingers are not spending too much time on the strings.



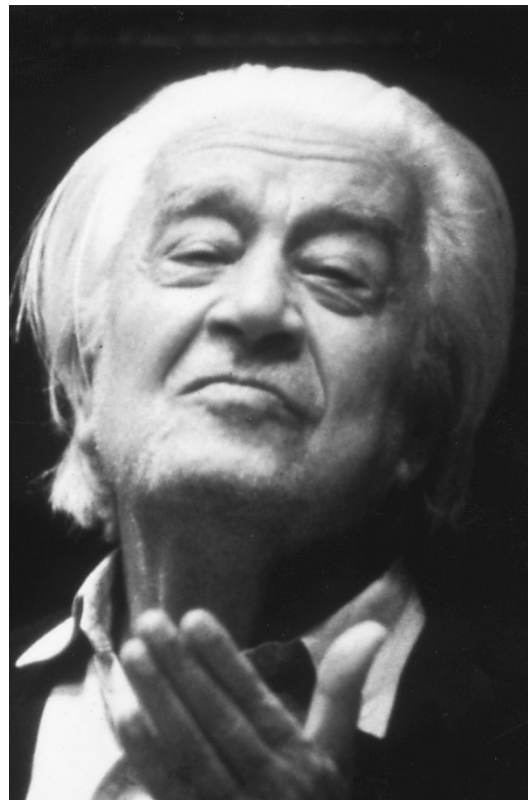
KEY TAKEAWAY

A fast attack doesn't mean playing faster - it simply means spending less time on the strings. The time in between the chords should remain the same.

Raphael recommends two exercises to develop technique in this section. First, to develop phrasing, repeat each chord three times before moving on. The extra sustain of the chord helps you to properly phrase the lines, as if you were singing them.

The second exercise, to practice legato, is to play the chord once and then a second time "in the resonance". This essentially means to play each chord at the same volume as the chord that's now dying out. It's harder to explain this exercise in text, so reference the video to watch and listen to Raphael play it.

Although the written tempo is 88 BPM, that doesn't mean you have to play exactly that every time. Raphael refers to an interview with the famous conductor Sergiu Celibidache, where he refers to tempo as a "condition" that depends on a lot of different elements, rather than a strict requirement. Therefore, it's good to practice the theme at different tempos and feel comfortable at whatever speed the situation (room reverb, age of strings, etc.) calls for.



To end his discussion of the theme, Raphael shares a few fingerings he has found are best for maintaining legato. In the right hand, Raphael recommends assigning one finger per voice. This helps keep things simple and flowing.

VARIATION 1

For each variation, Raphael demonstrates the proper timing in between to make each transition as smooth as possible. In this case, Raphael takes a lot of time between the theme and the first variation in order to relax his body and prepare for the correct energy and dynamic.

Instead of articulating each of the thirds as written in the score, Raphael prefers slurring the first two. He does this by keeping his left thumb in the same spot on the back of the neck and sliding his two fingers back. Not only is this technically easier, but it also differentiates the thirds from the chords that occur in between.

Another important technical aspect to be aware of is muting the basses so that they don't ring over the thirds. For this, Raphael recommends cutting all the basses by placing your thumb on the third string and using the back of your thumb to mute the 4th, 5th, and 6th strings. He demonstrates an exercise for practicing this where you simply play the open G once at the beginning of each section of thirds so your thumb learns where to go.

To differentiate the thirds and chords even further, Raphael suggests turning your hand perpendicular to the strings when playing the thirds to give them a brighter character than the full, warm chords.



For all the variations, when you repeat, there is no standard way of differentiating the material. However, it is important to do something different to keep the music interesting and your audience engaged.

VARIATION 2

Transitioning into the second variation, Raphael doesn't pause, but flows straight into it from the first variation. The dynamic level also stays the same.

The key to this variation is bringing out the melody, which is difficult because the voices are so compact. Raphael recommends playing slowly at first, and practicing control of your fingers so that you don't attack the accompaniment as loud as the melody.

KEY TAKEAWAY

It's crucial that you "hear" exactly what you want to play before plucking the strings. This is the only way you can train your fingers to play as you want.

Although the G in bar 5 is written as a quarter note, Raphael suggests finding a fingering that allows you to hold it for the entirety of the bar. The structure of the piece is more consistent if all the bass notes are left to ring. The same applies for the G in bar 13.

Raphael plays this piece around 100 beats per minute, a bit slower than the previous variations, to create some contrast throughout the performance.

VARIATION 3



Welcome to the first variation written by Miguel Llobet! Transitioning into this variation, Raphael likes to begin slow and relaxed, to give himself space to prepare his ears and fingers. However, he likes to accelerate quickly, with control, after the first few bars to make the virtuosity of this new variation clear. By the third measure, he is usually at full speed.

The ornaments are often the most difficult part of this piece for players. Raphael argues that they should actually be more relaxed and light than straight and heavy. Avoid placing a heavy accent on the first downbeat of the measure.

Raphael practices by pausing right before the ornament to prepare his hand in a relaxed manner. This will allow him to effortlessly execute the slurs. You can also practice rhythm by removing the ornaments all together. This way your hand already knows how to play precisely what is written.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Practice this variation without the ornaments to make sure you are playing the proper rhythm. This also teaches your hand to relax in between the ornaments.

In this variation you are very free to choose your own musical ideas and play with the dynamics, rhythm, articulation, tension, etc. This is especially the case if you decide to take the repeat. It's a good idea to practice many different musical versions so that when you are on stage, you are comfortable with doing whatever you are feeling at that moment.

"I worked on every possible interpretation of dynamics and tempo, and now when I'm on stage I don't know how I'll play something until the very moment I play it".

VARIATION 4

Raphael transitions directly into variation four by trying to play “within the resonance”, or around the same volume as the dying note.

The key technique for success in this variation is the tremolo. From a technical standpoint, Raphael always plants his i and m fingers in the right hand as he is playing his thumb. He recommends practicing the tremolo very slowly and repeatedly relaxing the right hand after each note you pluck.



Often, students play the bass note too loudly and the tremolo notes get covered up. To combat this, Raphael practices the entire variation very slow, first pianissimo, and then forte. This will allow you to play any dynamic at any point during the piece.

In the left hand, Raphael tries to be very efficient with barres. Any time he can pick up or do a partial barre, he does so to delay the effects of tension.

VARIATION 5

Raphael connects from the fourth variation by keeping the tempo the same and keeping the dynamic level about the same. He considers this variation a bridge to the sixth variation, which is a climax of the piece. For this reason, don't worry about playing the fifth variation forte.

Choose a good left hand fingering by delaying your movements as much as you can. Prepare everything as early as possible. Be sure to play this piece very rhythmically. Again, don't be afraid to be creative with dynamics.

VARIATION 6

Raphael doesn't take any break into the sixth variation, but starts right on the downbeat after the final bar of the fifth variation. This is natural since there is very little stylistic difference between the two. Give a clear impression of virtuosity here- take your time and play with energy. Crescendo towards the end of phrases. If you have to play slower to articulate clearly, that's better than playing so fast that the audience can't understand the line. In fact, clarity will make the score sound more impressive than speed alone.

Between the fourth and fifth bars, it's impossible to not take a short pause. Raphael slows down at the end of measure four, pictured on the right, to make the pause natural.



Make the piece easy for yourself, and take your time. Anticipate every shift of the left hand with a musical direction- either a decrescendo or a ritardando. Also, don't forget to prepare your right hand fingers in advance of large shifts.



Lastly, measure seven into eight contains a tricky descending passage. Put a short break after the dominant chord on the first beat of the eighth bar. This makes the passage easier and adds a pleasing musical effect. Additionally, you can slow toward the end of measure six to prepare for the seventh measure.

INTERMEZZO



Raphael puts a few full seconds of silence before the Intermezzo. Here Llobet writes *Andante molto espressivo*, which is a complete change of pace from the previous variation.

For the melody, choose which stroke type you want to use and commit. Make the accompaniment very light, and place it clearly on the upbeat. The melody is very repetitive, so find ways to make each measure different. At first, you can take your time, but increase tempo and dynamic level quickly. On the next phrase, start the journey over again. Group phrases in four bars, and do the same on the repeat.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Good phrasing is essential in this Intermezzo. Find places at the end of every four bars or so to place a rest, and make arrival at that spot your musical goal.

Finally, Raphael likes to keep his finger on the B-sharp in the sixth bar so that it keeps ringing over the next two beats.

VARIATION 7



Raphael puts a long break after the Intermezzo, and begins the seventh variation very softly. Play with a very clear sound, pianissimo, with the left thumb low on the back of the neck to help your fingers move faster. In a piece with a lot of variations, it's important to create memorable effects as often as possible. Here, try to create something truly special and unique with your sound and color.

“When we have a lot of variations, it's important to create something special in each variation. Create special effects and then work on them.”

Use the direction of the melody to inform your dynamics. Let the bass ring for the full measure, rather than cutting it after one beat.

The right hand fingering here is complex, so Raphael recommends practicing with an individualized approach. Rather than thinking about the part before playing, play it as fast as you can, and then make small changes to fix mistakes.

In the left hand, when you have to play high up on the neck, tilt your wrist slightly up and to the left, as in the image below on the left. This will help you play faster and more relaxed. When Raphael is lower on the neck in measure ten, as in the image below on the right, he straightens out his wrist a lot more.



VARIATION 8

The final note of the seventh variation already sets the mood quite well for the eighth variation, which isn't very technically demanding. It's still essential that you breathe deeply and prepare your hands and mind for the harmonics, otherwise they won't come across as natural.

Be aware, as well, that some notes don't speak when plucked directly over the soundhole, but must be played either closer to the bridge or farther up on the neck. Sound quality is one of the most important elements of this piece. Search for a warm and round timbre. To help with this, make as little contact with the string as possible in the left hand. Finally, cut the resonant strings before the following bar so that harmonies aren't mixed.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Listen carefully that the harmonics don't sound nasally. Practice fixing this by adjusting where you pluck the notes and the pressure you use.

VARIATION 9



To transition, Raphael takes almost no pause, and begins this variation slightly slower than written. Then he makes an *accelerando* to get up to the written tempo.

On the margin of the score, a note is printed to play this variation with your left hand only. The right hand doesn't do much to help the piece. This is an example of how this piece is written to push the performer to overcome difficulties on their instrument. It provides quite the challenge!

Playing with the left hand alone creates a special challenge for fingerings. It's best to avoid open strings entirely, since those will almost certainly be more accented than the others, and you want a homogenous sound as much as possible.

In measure seven, a special fingering trick makes the passage easier. Use your first finger as a barre across the strings, a very stable way of executing what would otherwise be very difficult.



VARIATION 10

Raphael leaves a short break after the ninth variation before coming in forte at the beginning of the tenth variation. This is the finale of the piece, so don't be afraid to give the impression of a really big sound, rather than something fast.

Be careful to take enough time to prepare chords, and to not rush. On the repeat, Raphael uses a different articulation for the thirty-second notes. Rather than slurring all four of them, he will attack the third one to get a bigger sound. Finally, the very end is written Rapido, so don't be afraid to play it with energy and excitement!

This concludes this video on Variations on a Theme by Sor. We hope it was a helpful resource as you continue practicing this challenging yet evocative piece. Good luck!

RESOURCES



Thomas Viloteau's lesson on the Mozart Variations

Go inside another famous theme and variations by Sor, this time taught by another French GFA winner Thomas Viloteau!

Rovshan Mamedkuliev's lesson On Color

Expand your musical toolbox one step further with Rovshan's popular lesson on achieving different timbre's on the instrument Segovia once called "the little orchestra."



