The Guitar à la Sagrini

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Introduction

The evolution of the guitar is paved with a formidable number of innovative ideas – some better than others. This is especially true of the Romantic era. I was puzzled when I first encountered Viennese guitars that had neither the proportions of any standard guitar, nor the size of a typical terz guitar; and even more so when I realised that there was a French counterpart to these instruments. It dawned on me that these instruments were too many to be dismissed as a random phenomenon. But although there was bound to be an idea behind the proposition, I couldn't really make out what it might be. And to this day these instruments are often left aside for being somewhat smallish, or, in the context of growing interest in terz guitars, hastily affiliated to those.

As we will see, there are quite a few parallels between the "guitar à la Sagrini", which this paper will introduce, and the so-called "Legnani-model".[1] The later being the result of one of the best known collaborations between a guitar player, Luigi Legnani, and a guitar maker, Johann Georg Stauffer. Although the specifics of their joint venture remain unknown, it appears that the Stauffers, father and son, built instruments which met Legnani's requirements, while the use of his name would benefit both parties.

But the most significant aspect of this matter is that the model in question was picked up and adapted by many other makers, some of which even copied the promotional headline "after the model of Luigi Legnani".[2] While this was quite a singular event in 19th century guitar-making, there are a some parallels here with the guitar à la Sagrini.

In Search of Sagrini

Like the Legnani-model, the guitar à la Sagrini establishes a connection between one particular player and an important number of guitars built by several makers. Until now, a guitar of the type was considered to be a terz guitar (which is reductive), a Legnani-model (which is inaccurate), or even a "Guadagnini-model" (which is wrong). While Legnani-model and terz guitar were nearly exclusive to the Austrian Empire and some neighbouring regions, the guitar à la Sagrini was totally exclusive to the North of France, Belgium and England.

But first things first: a couple of years ago, publisher and researcher Robert Coldwell was contacted by Bernard Lewis from England. Mr. Lewis submitted the idea of researching the widely forgotten guitar virtuoso Louis "Luigi" Perret Sagrini (c.1809-1874) [fig. 1]. Since Mr. Coldwell already had a vivid interest in Sagrini's music, the proposition came in handy. The result of their collaboration is *In Search of Sagrini*, a detailed biography of the virtuoso which was published earlier this year.[3]

To get a sense of the popularity Sagrini enjoyed in his day, it is useful to read what his contemporaries wrote about him. One example among many others was issued in the Paris music journal "Le Ménéstrel" on 6 April 1834:

> "One should not be surprised at the lower rank the guitar holds within the Arts, nor that Sagrini, Huerta, Saur [sic] and Legnani, despite their remarkable talents, have never been able to stake a claim for larger recognition in the musical world." [4]

■ Opposite page: Portrait of Luigi Sagrini engraved by William Walther after a drawing by Johannes Notz. Published by Johanning & Whatmore, London 1830. Courtesy of New York Public Library.


C. Walther. f
Printed by Engelmann & Co.
LUIGI SAGRINI.
Published July, 1830, by Johanning & Whatmore, 126 Regent Street.

FIG. 1

While this quote conveys the usual disdain for the guitar that period papers are full of, the selection of emblematic virtuosos is remarkable. As is the fact that Sagrini comes first, despite the fact that two centuries later he is the least known among those listed.

It was a guitar [fig. 2] bought and transmitted to him by his father which first raised Mr. Lewis' interest in Luigi Sagrini, for the instrument bears a handwritten label with the following inscription:

"Guitare à la Sagrini an [or: en] 1825" [fig. 3]

The French phrasing is a bit odd: while it asserts that the instrument somehow meets Sagrini's requirements, the meaning of "an [or: en] 1825" is ambiguous. It could mean to say that the creation of a model inspired by Sagrini dates back to 1825, but also that this particular guitar was built in 1825 (personally, I would rather date it from c.1828).

During his researches, Robert Coldwell revealed the existence of this instrument to me because he was very much intrigued, especially by its label. Even more so since he managed to identify the hand-writing as that of Luigi's younger half-brother, Louis "Italo" Auguste Sagrini (1822-?).[5] We can reasonably assume that Italo – who like his elder brother played guitar and piano – knew perfectly well why he would link this specific instrument to his brother's ideas on the guitar. But then, the fact that Italo was only 3 years old in 1825 also proves that the label was put inside the guitar years after it was built. Two facts which are crucial to everything that will follow.

And speaking of age: in 1825, Luigi Sagrini would have been around 16. He started his career as a performing artist at around 9.[6] It is therefore not that surprising that, even at a young age, he would have had some ideas of his own on the instrument he played.

Call me by your name

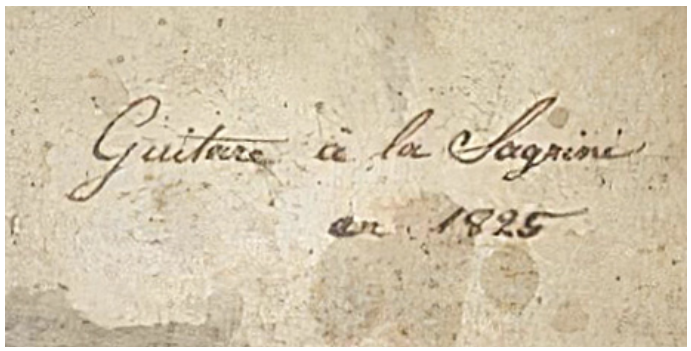
Searching for further references on Sagrini, Robert Coldwell came across one of the more obscure guitar tutorials of the 19th century, the *Méthode Raisonnée de Guitare* by Tito Seroni, published in Versailles in 1826. At that time, Luigi Sagrini and his family had already moved to Paris, where they stayed for a couple of years. Luigi performed there in public many times and some of his compositions were issued by local publishers.[7]
While we do not know what was the relationship between Sagrini and Seroni, it is quite certain they met. And in any case, Seroni was very much influenced by the young man from Piémont, as we can gather from what he writes in his method [fig. 4]:

> "Nota bene: I advise and strongly recommend that amateurs use the guitar called 'à la Sagrini', or terz guitar, named this way because it can be tuned a third above standard tuning; this is rendered possible – without risking the strings breaking – by the guitar being of shorter length than others; also, with the frets being closer together, positions [sic] are made easier, which in turn has a positive effect on [the pupil's] progress. By tuning it to standard tuning, one can accompany a singer or play the guitar part in an ensemble just as with other guitars. The tonal quality of this instrument all over the scale is remarkable, and comes close to that of the piano."

And this is where the plot thickens. While it is easy to miss (certainly only few copies of this tutorial were printed), this is a tremendously interesting quote. On first reading it raises the impression that "guitar[e] à la Sagrini" is merely a synonym for terz guitar. And of course, a faint possibility that this may be the simple explanation to the whole matter remains.
But then, why did Seroni not just stick to *guitare à la*

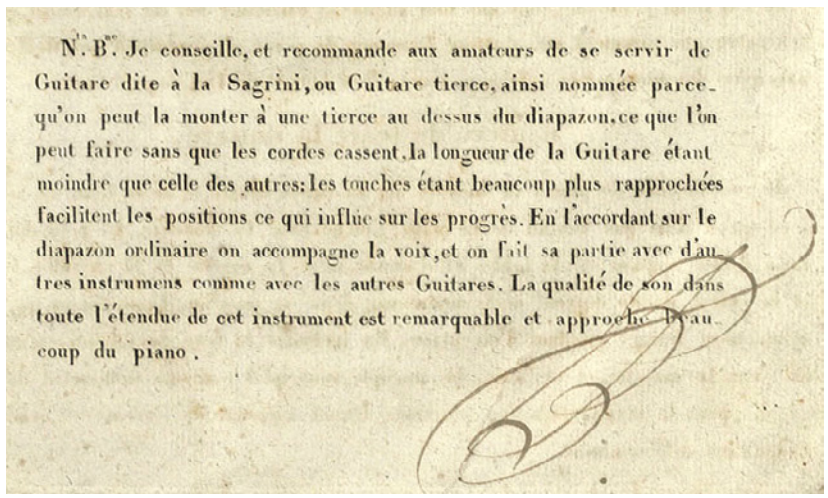
Fig.2

Fig.3



■ Anonymous guitar "à la Sagrini" (Mirecourt, c.1825) and its handwritten label written by Louis "Italo" Auguste Sagrini. Courtesy of Bernard Lewis, Shrewsbury.

Fig.4



N.B. Je conseille, et recommande aux amateurs de se servir de Guitare dite à la Sagrini, ou Guitare tierce, ainsi nommée parce-qu'on peut la monter à une tierce au dessus du diapazon, ce que l'on peut faire sans que les cordes cassent, la longueur de la Guitare étant moindre que celle des autres; les touches étant beaucoup plus rapprochées facilitent les positions ce qui influe sur les progrès. En l'accordant sur le diapazon ordinaire on accompagne la voix, et on fait sa partie avec d'autres instrumens comme avec les autres Guitares. La qualité de son dans toute l'étendue de cet instrument est remarquable et approche beaucoup du piano.

■ Excerpt from the method *Méthode raisonnée de guitare* by Tito Seroni, Versailles 1826. This method was mentioned in the journal "Le Constitutionnel" on 6 October 1826 (iss. n° 279) and advertised in the journal "Le Figaro" on 11 October 1826 (iss. n° 261). Courtesy of Musik- och teaterbiblioteket/The Music and Theatre Library of Sweden, Stockholm.

tierce or *guitare tierce*, as did Carulli, one of the few to write music for the instrument in France?[8] Also, why increase the ambiguity by saying that "it [the guitar à la Sagrini] *can* be tuned a third above standard tuning"? If he was speaking solely about the terz guitar, it certainly would have been more accurate to say that it *is* tuned a third above standard tuning. Also, considering that the terz guitar was not remotely as popular in France as it was in Vienna,[9] how would introducing a new name for it be helpful?

Seroni's praise of the instrument's advantages seems to hint at a special type of guitar, one that would be slightly different from the archetypical Viennese terz guitar with a vibrating string length of c.560 mm. For he explicitly suggests that one and the same instrument could be tuned either in G (for a supposedly better tone), or in E (for playing repertoire pieces in the original key).
Evidently, there are a few things one could object to that idea right away, as for example its impracticability, especially in a concert situation. Also, why not just use a capodastro? Because of the range reduction it induces, maybe, or the absence of open strings with their particular tone and sustain? But whatever question or objection this might raise, we have to acknowledge that Tito Seroni – making himself the voice of Sagrini – expresses an idea that is nothing less than a paradigm shift: the terz guitar is considered superior to the one in standard tuning. Once you come to that conclusion, none of the above objections are relevant. And ultimately, it is a player's choice.

This being said, even if you prefer the terz guitar, playing in E is still indispensable to put flesh on the bones of your repertoire. And this is precisely the dilemma that somebody – Luigi Sagrini, if we choose to believe his brother Italo and his disciple Tito Seroni – attempted to solve. But to do so, he had to consider not only the instruments' possibilities and limitations, but also those of the strings.

The Gut of the Matter

Imagine Sagrini in Paris around 1825 wanting to switch between two different tunings on one and the same guitar. Two types of instruments he probably had at hand were French guitars in standard tuning and Viennese terz guitars; if those were of fairly recent make, they had vibrating string lengths of respectively c.630 mm and c.560 mm. And of course, they were set up with gut strings.
Let us focus on the first string. It is the most interesting one in our context, not only because it is a plain one, but also because it is most often the one with the highest tension. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a consensus on this matter among today's string manufacturers. Which is a bit odd, because the first string should also be the most expressive one – after all, the French did not give it the name "chanterelle" for no reason! From this point of view, a more malleable string seems preferable over an extra tense one. This is especially true for nylon strings, since the material is already c.10% denser than gut.
But when it comes to gut strings, there were (and are) a couple of good reasons to favor a first string that is relatively thicker than the others: it makes the string more resistent to wear when played with nail, and easier to pluck when played without. This is why the following demonstration is based on a total string tension of 27 kg on both guitars (i.e. an average tension of 4,5 kg per string), and an individual tension of the first string of 5,5 kg.[10]

A bit of physics: a gut string of 1 m in length will break at a tension equalling a frequency of c. 260 hz – whatever its diameter.[11] This is called the breaking point, a

notion which musical instrument makers in the past were more aware of than today's, for it was at the very heart of the conception of string instruments. Nowadays, it is taken for granted that the vibrating string length of a standard-size classical guitar lies somewhere between 650 and 660 mm and that modern nylon strings, even at tensions which the industry refers to as "hard" or "extra hard", will do the job without breaking. But under normal circumstances, this was true for gut strings, too.

As we are imagining Sagrini tuning his guitars either up or down a third, we also have to consider huge variations in concert pitch. Let us settle for one which a guitar player in Paris in the 1820s was likely to adopt: 431 hz.[12] The chart below [fig. 5] should help to visualise and compare the different parameters at play.

Tuning the first string of the guitar in E up will of course bring it closer to its breaking point, but even tuning it up to G4 will still not make it break. Much more problematic is the effect of the total string tension on the instrument: guitars played around 1825 had no overlaying fingerboard – and without it, the neck-to-body junction was a weak spot. Tuned up to G, the total string tension of the guitar in E would rise beyond 38 kg and may very well put the instrument in harm's way! Tuning the guitar in G down to E on the other hand is obviously risk-free for both strings and instrument. But with an average of 4,5 kg per string, when tuned down to E, the total string tension will fall drastically to below 20 kg. On a small-bodied terz guitar, the outcome is utterly disappointing.

	Vibrating string length	Breaking point frequency	Frequency of 1st string (open)	Diam. of 1st string at a tension of 5,5 kg
Guitar in E (at 431 hz)	630 mm	413 hz (260:0,63)	323 hz (E4)	0,55 mm
Guitar in G (at 431 hz)	560 mm	464 hz (260:0,56)	384 hz (G4)	0,53 mm

FIG. 5

The Guitar à la Sagrini

The logical conclusion to the problems caused by the interactions between vibrating string length, tension and pitch, is that an instrument able to accommodate alternate tunings had to differ from period standards. To design such an instrument, one had to find a middle ground: considering period standards and local variations thereof, a vibrating string length around 595 mm is exactly that.
In a French guitar from c.1825 with one more or less fix point (which is the location of the 12th fret), a shorter vibrating string length will translate into a position of the bridge closer to the soundhole. For the sake of agreeable proportions, this induces shortening the body. And in order to avoid the effect described above of a small-bodied instrument tuned too deep, this in turn induces the enlargement of the body. All these adjustments result in a body shape adapted to a shorter vibrating string length, without compromising on body volume. This appears to be the concept of the guitar à la Sagrini.
Let us briefly review the characteristics of the guitar à la Sagrini, and of those three models related to it or with which it could be mixed up:

Guitar à la Sagrini:

– vibrating string length typically between 590 and 600 mm
– tuned alternatively in G or in E
– first appearance in the North of France in 1825
– in existence in France, Belgium and England until c.1835/40

Viennese-School terz guitar:

– vibrating string length typically between 560 and 565 mm
– tuned in G
– first appearance in Vienna around 1813/14
– in existence in Austria and southern Germany until the early 20th century

Guitar "after the model of Luigi Legnani":

– important variations of the vibrating string length
– both standard guitars in E and terz guitars in G
– first appearance in Vienna around 1821/22
– in existence in Austria and Germany until the early 20th century, although increasingly rare after the decline of Legnani's fame
– according to Diabelli the only requirement that goes back to Legnani and therefore defines the model is the number of frets, which should be at least 22[13]

Viennese-School intermediate-sized guitar [fig. 6]:

– vibrating string length typically between c. 590 and 605 mm
– (possibly) to be tuned alternatively in G or in E, just as the guitar à la Sagrini
– first appearance in Vienna in the mid-1820s (earlier examples could just be terz guitars before 560 to 564 mm settled as the standard for the type)
– in existence in Austria and southern Germany until the late 19th century

Note that the name of the last category is merely a descriptive one – there is no historical reference for it. And while it is tempting to refer to an instrument of the type as "Viennese guitar à la Sagrini", there is an important risk of creating an anachronism here. Because for now, there is no way to ascertain chronology: either the idea of an intermediary instrument surfaced in Vienna and Sagrini got hold of it, or he knew the terz guitar and came up with the idea to alter it himself (possibly influencing Vien-

Fig.6

Fig.7

■ Juxtaposition of a guitar à la Sagrini by Dominique Roudhloff, Mirecourt, c.1828/30 (see pp.24-25) and a Legnani-model eight-string guitar by Johann Anton Stauffer, Vienna, c.1837 (see *Stauffer & Co. - The Viennese Guitar of the 19th Century*, pp.172-173). Photo: E. P. Hofmann.

■ Intermediate-sized guitar by Nikolaus Georg Ries, Vienna, c.1830. Vibrating string length: 595 mm. Courtesy of Brigitte Zaczek, Vienna.

nese makers in return). Not to forget that sometimes, the same idea pops up in different places at the same time.

In any case, some degree of Viennese influence in the creation of the guitar à la Sagrini is likely. Especially since Sagrini and Luigi Legnani seem to have had some esteem for each other. Whether or not they actually met we do not know, but they issued mutually dedicated compositions: Sagrini his *Grandes Variations* op. 4 dedicated to Legnani, and Legnani his *Variations Brilliante*s op. 9 and *Pot-Pourri en Caprice* op. 32 dedicated to Sagrini. Interestingly, the title page of the *Variations Brilliante*s op. 9 even bears mention of the fact that these variations "were performed several times in concert in Paris by Mr. Sagrini son".[14]

While the resemblance between the guitar à la Sagrini and the Viennese-School intermediate-sized guitar is striking, no known period document backs up the idea that the later was conceived to accommodate alternate tunings. There is no remark similar to that of Seroni to be found in any Austrian or German method. A fact that explains why long before the guitar à la Sagrini surfaced, guitars of both types already raised questions (and were often used as terz guitars).

Also, many of the Viennese-School intermediate-sized guitars bear labels with the reference to Luigi Legnani, for one and the same instrument may fall into both categories if it meets the requirements of both (many Viennese guitars do). And to make things more confusing still, some later guitars by Anton Stauffer do not bear the reference to Legnani, do not fall into the intermediate-sized category... and yet display a strikingly similar design to that of the guitar à la Sagrini! [fig. 7]

From Paris to London (via Mirecourt)

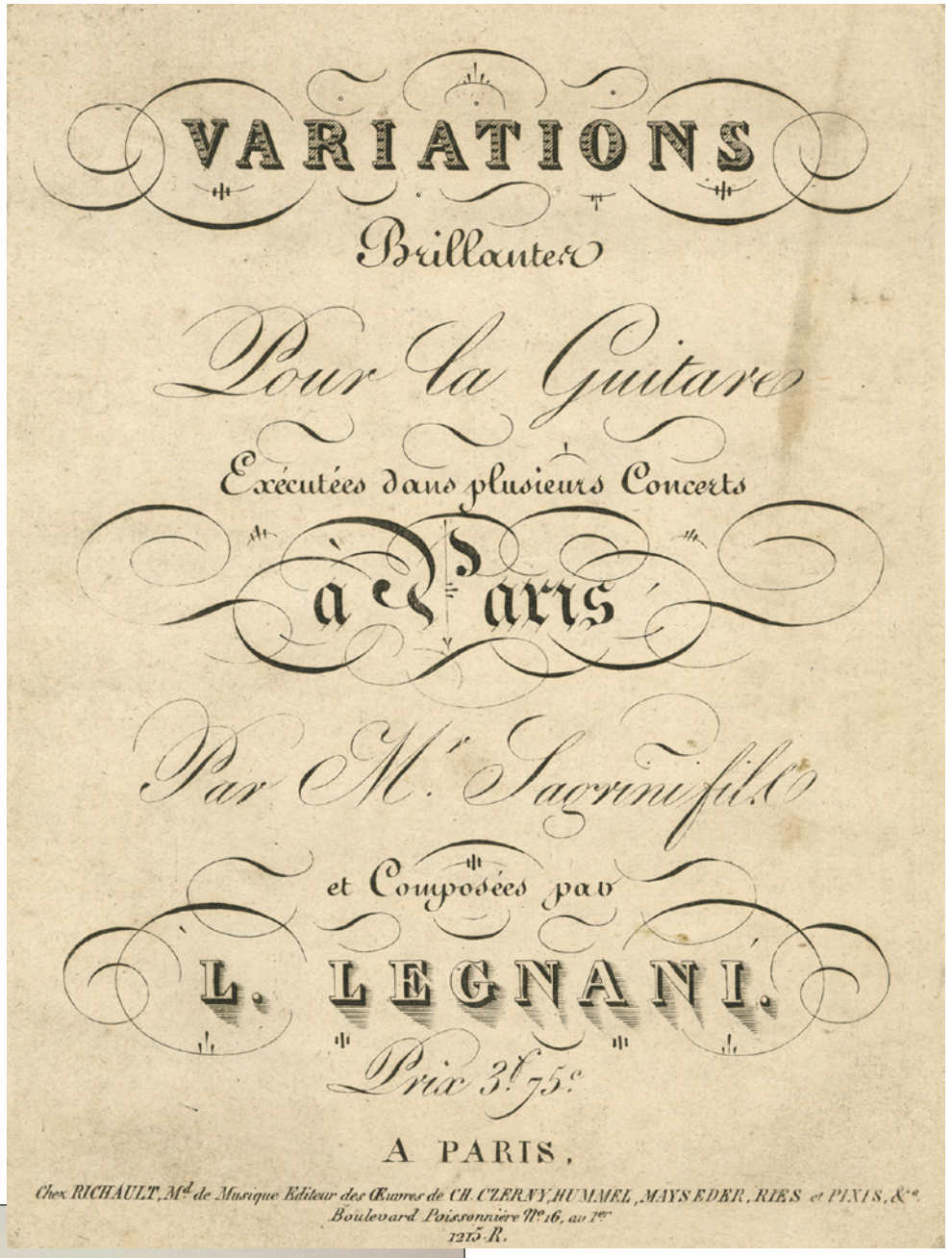
So how does the guitar à la Sagrini relate to the virtuoso's musical activities in Paris, the north of France and Belgium over a period of at least 5 years? Like many virtuosos of his time Sagrini travelled and moved a lot. In doing so, he was bound not only to meet colleagues and fellow guitar aficionados from all over Europe, but also to learn to know new instruments.
While he was still living in his native town Chambéry early concert tours led him to Turin, Neufchâtel and Lyon. In late 1823 or early 1824, he and his family moved to Paris. And from 1826 onwards, ever more concert reviews testify to him touring the North of France. He thus performed in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Valenciennes, Lille and Douai,[15] but also in Belgium (namely in Brussels, Ghent and Liège). This intense concert activity in the region went on until 1829. During the summer of 1829 he performed in England and the whole Sagrini family eventually moved there.[16]

Unfortunately, there is little known about the instrument(s) Sagrini actually played. In one of the many laudatory concert reviews – this one from 20 February 1828 in the paper *Petites affiches* (which was actually quoting another paper, the *Mémorial de la Scarpe*) – the anonymous author wrote the following:

> "[...] the enchantress [the guitar], even if she was made from the wood of the lemon-tree, all shining with mother-of-pearl, gold and silver, would run great risk of being broken into a thousand pieces [...]"[17]

While the allegorical context of this description does not permit to conclude that it is for sure Sagrini's guitar that is described here, it appears likely. By speaking of "lemon-tree", the author means to say that the back

Fig.8



■ Title page of *Variations Brillantes*, op. 9 by Luigi Legnani, published by Richault, Paris, c. 1827. It bears the interesting mention that the variations in question "have been performed in public on several occasions by M. Sagrini son". Courtesy of Robert Coldwell, Dallas.

Fig.9

■ Terz guitar by Delannoy, Lille 1833. This instrument bears a handwritten label with the sequential number 320. Vibrating string length: 557 mm. Courtesy of Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse, Lille.

and sides of the guitar were made of satinwood. A mislabelling that goes back to the use in French of the term *citronnier* (literally: lemon-tree) for satinwood. The unlucky terminology created some confusion in the past – and still does, for the various species commercialised as satinwood have in fact no botanical link with the lemon tree.[18] In our context, it is important to stress that this wood was not only used by Lacote and others in Paris, but also in the provinces. The mention of satinwood merely suggests that whatever guitar Sagrini played in the late 1820s was likely to be French and of recent make.
As for the expression "gold and silver", it is probably not to be taken literally, but rather a figure of speech enhancing the fact that the instrument was very shiny and amply decorated (which rather hints at a Mirecourt-made guitar).

Also, this description reinforces the idea that Mr. Lewis' guitar is not one played or owned by Sagrini himself. We already could assume that, based on the fact that if Italo Sagrini had wanted not only to link the model, but one instrument in particular to his elder brother, he certainly would have found a less ambiguous way to do so.

The Fab Four

Out of a good number of surviving guitars à la Sagrini I could ascertain, I want to present four in particular. They all share the specific features described earlier, and the first three also have in common that they are (presumably) anonymous Mirecourt-made instruments, featuring highly interesting handwritten labels. The fourth one makes an exception, for it is neither anonymous, nor from Mirecourt, nor bearing a handwritten label. But it complements the other ones beautifully.

Guitar no.1 [fig. 2, 3]**:**

This is the guitar belonging to Mr. Lewis which displays the label [fig. 3] that started this whole line of research. The instrument features not only the design and proportions described above, it also displays distinctive decorative elements and craftsmanship. The striking design of the rosette recalls remaining guitars built and/or sold by the Delannoy brothers in Lille: at least one out of the three brothers (Louis Joseph, Augustin Joseph and Jacques François – all registered instrument makers and dealers) made guitars. This is made clear by the personal make of the remaining guitars and supported by their handwritten labels, featuring the year of making and individual number of each guitar. Guitars by Delannoy that I know stretch over a period going from 1819 (no. 39) to 1833 (no. 320, a genuine terz guitar) [fig. 9]. These numbers indicate an average production of c. 20 guitars per year and suggest one man's output rather than a family operation. A couple of these guitars (including that from 1819 and another one from 1825) have virtually the same soundhole decoration as **guitar no.1**. But the overall design is not the same, and neither is the craftsmanship. Mr. Lewis' guitar was certainly made in Mirecourt, possibly on behalf of the Delannoy brothers.

Guitar no. 2 [fig. 10-12]**:**

This is a nonidentical twin of **guitar no.1**. It is virtually the same in terms of craftsmanship and design, but the head has a slightly different outline and the body is made of rosewood (instead of *pommelé* mahogany). The bridge is original and unaltered, showing how the bridge of **guitar no.1** looked originally, before it was modified to accommodate a bone saddle.

What makes this second guitar quite extraordinary is the fact that it, too, bears an ominous handwritten

Fig.10

Fig.11

■ Front view, original handwritten label and view of the soundboard bracing of an anonymous guitar à la Sagrini", Mirecourt, probably 1827. Vibrating string length: 590 mm. Total length: 865 mm. Body length: 415 mm. Body widths (upper bout/waist/lower bout): 250/172,5/326 mm. Private collection France. Photos: E. P. Hofmann.

Fig.12

label – albeit not written by Italo Sagrini – which says:

> "Exposition 1827 – perfectionnés an [en?] 1828" [fig. 11]

Again, the French phrasing is a bit off, but the message is relatively clear: the instrument and the novelty it stands for have been presented to the public in 1827 and perfected the following year. While several guitars were exposed at the "Exposition nationale de Paris" in 1827, it seems that there was no guitar à la Sagrini among them.[19] But in that same year, there also were smaller expositions of industrial products in Valenciennes and Douai. Unfortunately, the only available catalogue (which pertains to the exhibition in Douai) solely bears mention of a "lyre-shaped guitar" presented by a certain Blangarnon... a locksmith![20]

Remarkably, the years indicated on the label correspond to the peak of Sagrini's concert activity in the north of France. Incidentally or not, it was also in 1828 that Sagrini met Napoléon Coste, who gave his concert debut in Valenciennes. Both men later performed together.[21] In any case, the label of **guitar no.2** reveals that something about this particular model was considered novelty (although it was not patented). And seeing that, like most other guitars of the type, it is a rather inconspicuous instrument, what could that novelty be, if not its unusual vibrating string length and specific use?

Guitar no. 3 [fig. 13,14]:

This instrument was offered for sale by a French auction house in May 2021; it displays the same overall design, proportions and specifics as **guitars no.1 and 2** (interestingly, all three guitars share the characteristic dot pattern design of the soundhole decoration). Also, although is was badly repaired and heavily modified, it is unmistakably Mirecourt-made (probably in the early 1830s). But most importantly, it carries yet another astonishing handwritten label:

> "Par Brevet D'invention / Lacote / Luthier Place Des / Victoires, N°5 / A Paris" [fig. 14]

First, let us get rid of the elephant in the room: this is not Lacote's work, nor does the label go back to any of his doing. But the style of hand-writing, the type of paper and the small damages of the label which match the small cracks in the veneered back it is glued on, all seem to indicate that this label has been in place for a long time. Whether this was a conscious act of forgery or a naive attempt of certification, it makes this instrument the third of the type to display a handwritten label from the 19th century that associates a guitar à la Sagrini with the idea of novelty – in this case by using the formula "par brevet d'invention" (which does NOT appear on Lacote's original label). On a side-note: the workshop address that is indicated on this label was valid only until 15 April 1829.

Guitar no. 4 [fig. 16,17]:

This is a guitar made by Pierre René Lacote. Although **guitar no. 3** is not his oeuvre, he was indeed one of the makers who adopted the guitar à la Sagrini. But his approach to it was ambiguous: while he took on the body design in a few guitars, he did not systematically implement the shorter vibrating string length. Also, the soundhole position is sometimes (again, not systematically) lowered to allow 22 frets. This guitar from 1827, sold by an auction house in England in 2017, features both 22 frets and a vibrating string length of 590 mm. It is de facto a Legnani-model AND a guitar à la Sagrini!

But there is more. In his book *Reminiscences of Mad-*

Fig.13

Fig.14

■ Anonymous guitar à la Sagrini, Mirecourt, c.1830/35 and the handwritten label glued on the inside of the back. Vibrating string length: 590 mm. Please note that while the label is indeed a fake, it appears not to have been glued inside the guitar in a recent past, as is revealed by the cracks of the paper matching those of the back exactly. The head and tuning machines are later replacements. Courtesy of Vichy Enchères, France.

ame Sidney Pratten: Guitariste and Composer Frank Mott Harrison, a former pupil of Mme Pratten, relates that as a child prodigy, Catharina Pelzer "played on a 'Terz' guitar – a small-sized instrument".[22] As Harrison does not mention Sagrini a single time, it should not surprise that the guitar à la Sagrini does not come up either. By 1899, he was certainly unaware of the instrument, as virtually every guitar enthusiast since. But the well-known engraved portrait of Catherina from c.1832 shows her with a French guitar which, by its size and proportions, looks rather like a guitar à la Sagrini than like a terz guitar. As does the one in the engraved portrait of her father, Ferdinand Pelzer. [fig. 15]
To let the cat out of the bag: **guitar no. 4** belonged to one Miss Harrison – a pupil of Catherina's sister and duo partner, Giulia Pelzer.[23]

Fig. 15

■ Portrait of Ferdinand Pelzer, London, c.1835. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

Close Colleagues and False Friends

Nearly all guitars à la Sagrini appear to have been manufactured by makers based in Mirecourt or in the North of France. Among the later are Michel Caye in Metz [fig. 22], Jean Charles Lullier in Boulogne sur Mer [fig. 23-27], Nicolas and Joseph Bonnel in Rouen (and later in Rennes) and, of course, the Delannoy brothers in Lille [fig. 18-21]. While most of these makers and dealers share some kind of connection to Mirecourt (because they originated from there and/or established business relations with local makers), it is not the sole thing they did have in common. Their geographical location was very much motivated by the fact that the stronghold of guitar-mania was about to shift: after having gone back and forth between Paris and Vienna, by the late 1820s it became foreseeable that London was to become the new epicentre of the phenomenon. Dealers like Mangin & Francais (who also originated from Mirecourt) did not establish in Lille simply to serve the local market: just like the makers mentioned above, they had the English market in mind and one foot in the nearest port.
In Mirecourt, Joseph Aubry, Leopold Maurice Cabasse (alias "Cabasse Bernard") [fig. 32], Charles Lété (alias "Lété l'ainé") [fig. 33], François Roudhloff (alias "Roudhloff Mauchant") and his nephew Dominique Roudhloff (alias "Roudhloff fils ainé") [fig. 28-31] and others [fig. 34-35] built guitars à la Sagrini.
To illustrate the relationship between the makers established in the North and those in Mirecourt, the example of the Roudhloff family is particularly interesting. Before Dominique and his younger brother Arnault would establish in London in 1834 (as other French guitar makers did before them), they knew a transitional period during which they had a business in Saint-Omer, strategically located halfway between Lille, the capital of the North, and Calais, the port closest to England. The partial shift of production

Fig.16

■ Front and back views of a guitar à la Sagrini by Pierre René Lacote, Paris 1827. Vibrating string length: 590 mm. Please note that the head is a later replacement. Courtesy of Brompton's Auctioneers, London.

Fig.17

Fig.18

■ Front and back views of a guitar à la Sagrini by Delannoy, Lille 1828. Vibrating string length: 590 mm. Contrary to other guitars by Delannoy, this guitar does not display the recognisable dot design, but a plain and elegant black and white purfling. Courtesy of Jean-Michel Renard, Bellenaves. Photos: E. P. Hofmann.

Fig.19

Fig.20

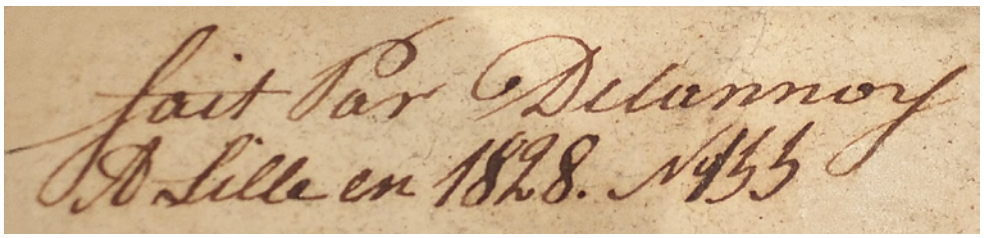


Fig.21

■ Original handwritten label (with the sequential number 155) and one-piece solid mahogany neck and heel of the guitar opposite. Courtesy of Jean-Michel Renard, Bellenaves. Photos: E. P. Hofmann.

from Mirecourt and Paris to various towns in the north resonates with the fact that **guitar no.1** was found in England.[24]

In addition to those of Lacote's guitars with a standard vibrating string length, there are also others which look very much like guitars à la Sagrini – but really aren't. During the first half of the 1830s violin makers Pierre and Hippolyte Sylvestre for example proposed very special guitars (probably manufactured by Grobert). While the shape of their recognisable model strongly recalls the guitar à la Sagrini, it also features a standard vibrating string length and 22 frets. It therefore complies with the essential requirement of the Legnani-model. Another example is an interesting guitar bearing an etched label in the name of Laurent Mairesse (a composer and vocal teacher in Lille). While the instrument matches the overall design of a guitar à la Sagrini, it is smaller and in fact one of the very rare French terz guitars (and again one certainly built in Mirecourt). In search of guitars à la Sagrini, there are some false friends to be found along the way.

Conclusion

When I first read Tito Seroni's recommendation from 1826 and got acquainted with Bernard Lewis' guitar à la Sagrini, I was immediately reminded of those hard to classify guitars I refer to in the introduction above. It struck me that contemporary players who tune these instruments up to G are actually right to do so. But then, those who take a more cautious approach and keep them tuned in E, are right too! A paradox which raises a question: how could a guitar which was purposely designed to accommodate both tunings not have had a proper name, at least in its day? The answer is: it most certainly had. We just didn't know.

To acknowledge the existence of the guitar à la Sagrini does not mean to say that the innovation it represents was conclusive or even ground-breaking. Truth be told, in the history of the guitar, few innovations were. But it adds a bit of colour to the already vivid picture of the Romantic era guitar and makes for a better understanding of what is (and what is not) the terz guitar. And last but not least, the preservation of a significant number of guitars à la Sagrini also attests to the influence of a musician who has since been nearly forgotten.

Fig.22

■ Guitar à la Sagrini by Michel Caye, Metz 1831. Courtesy of Bernhard Kresse, Cologne.

1. Cf. *Stauffer & Co. – The Viennese Guitar of the 19th Century*, Erik Pierre Hofmann, Pascal Mougin and Stefan Hackl, Germolles-sur-Grosne: Les Éditions des Robins, 2012.
2. *Ibidem*, pp. 52-54.
3. *In Search of Sagrini*, Bernard Lewis and Robert Coldwell, Dallas: DGA Editions, 2022.
4. Original text in French (excerpt): « On ne doit donc pas s'étonner si la guitare tient, dans l'art, un rang secondaire, et si les Sagrini, les Huerta, les Saur, les Legnani, malgré leur talent remarquable, n'ont jamais pu prétendre à un grand retentissement dans le monde musical. »
5. *In Search of Sagrini*, p. 5, 8.
6. *Ibidem*, pp.15.
7. *Ibidem*, pp.17-21.
8. See for example: *Deux Grand Duos pour Deux Guitares ordinaires ou Guitare Tierce et Guitare ordinaire*, by Frediunando Carulli, op. 294 (Paris: Petitbon, c.1826). Interestingly, there is only one published piece by Sagrini known so far that also explicitly requires the use of a terz guitar. But this should not surprise, because publishers were extremely reluctant to issue music that imposed instrumental choices that could scare away potential customers. In this respect, terz guitar and guitar à la Sagrini are equals.
9. Cf. *Stauffer & Co. – The Viennese Guitar of the 19th Century*, pp. 44-51.
10. It is a general misconception to equate the use of gut strings with much lower tension (compared to nylon strings). While gut is indeed c. 10% less dense than nylon, that does not automatically result in lesser tension, only in thinner strings at equal tension. Pretty much every find of old gut strings or fragments thereof on or inside historical guitars contradicts the idea of light tension on historical instruments, as does the use of gut strings' breaking point in the conception of stringed musical instruments over centuries.
11. See *The set-up of 4- and 6-course 18th century mandolins: a few considerations*, Mimmo Peruffo, Fomrhi Comm 2083.
12. Performing pitch or concert pitch has fluctuated extremely throughout history. More often than not, various pitches somehow coexisted at the same time in the same place. In 1823 in Paris, the Opéra worked with a concert pitch at 431 hz. Although other theatres worked at lower pitches at the same time (as for example the Théatre Feydeau at 428 hz), this comes closer to the value of 435 hz, which would later become known as "French Pitch". See *A History of Performing Pitch – The Story of "A"*, Bruce Haynes, Lanham, Maryland and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002, pp. 329-332, 346-349, 369-371.
13. *The Renewed Guitar*, Erik Pierre Hofmann and Stefan Hackl, Trambly: Les Éditions des Robins, 2021, pp. 81, 105.
14. *In Search of Sagrini*, p. 79.
15. Cf. *L'âge d'or de la vie musicale à Douai 1800-1850*, Guy Gosselin, Liege: Mardaga, 1994.
16. *In Search of Sagrini*, pp. 22-23.
17. Original text in French (excerpt): « Le beau jeune homme en accompagnant de sa mandore sa douloureuse stance, s'écrie tout charmé : ô ma guitare enchanteresse! . . . à la bonne heure, mais s'il tient un peu à cette enchanteresse, il fera prudemment de ne pas aller entendre M. Sagrini, il pourrait fort bien après, se trouver tout désenchanté et alors l'enchanteresse, fut-elle de boîs de citronier, toute resplendissante de nacre, d'or et d'argent, courrerait grand risque d'étre brisé en mille pièces. »
18. While "satinwood" or *citronnier* are commercial terms, the species behind most of the exotic hard-woods commercialised under those denominations are *Chloroxylon swietenia*, *Zanthoxylum flavum* and others.
19. Cf. *Tableaux des expositions de 1798 à 1900*, Malou Haine, Paris: Institut de recherche sur le patrimoine musical en France, 2008, p. 7 (PDF).
20. Town archives of Douai, call number 2R46: *Notice sur l'Exposition des produits de l'Industrie et des arts qui a lieu à Douai en 1827*, pp. 36-37. In all likelihood, the so-called guitar was in fact a household device.
21. *In Search of Sagrini*, pp. 24-27; also: *Napoléon Coste: Composer and Guitarist in the Musical Life of 19th-century Paris* (biography), Ari van Vliet, Zwolle: Cumuli foundation, 2015, pp. 21-23.
22. *Reminiscences of Madame Sidney Pratten: Guitariste and Composer*, Frank Mott Harrison, Bournemouth: Barnes & Mullins, 1899, p. 20.
23. See this excerpt of Brompton's original item description: "This lot comes with many items relating to the Pelzer family, and includes: printed music by Madame Pratten (5 books), a printed portrait of Catherina Pelzer (age nine), advertising pertaining to Madame Giulia Pelzer, two postcard letters in Giulia Pelzer's hand, gut strings, guitar and string receipts, and one booklet titled: 'The Guitar' by Giulia Pelzer. Note: This guitar belonged to a Miss Harrison who was a pupil of Madame Pratten's sister, Giulia Pelzer." In this context, it is also noteworthy that among the "Madame Sidney Pratten Collection of Guitars and Related Ephemera" (Gardiner Houlgate, sale of 11 March 2022, lot no.1301) was one anonymous, Mirecourt-made guitare à la Sagrini.
24. *In Search of Sagrini*, pp.1-4.

Fig.23

Fig.24

■ Front and back views of a guitar à la Sagrini by Jean Charles Lullier, Boulogne sur Mer, c.1828. Vibrating string length: c.600 mm. Please note that the neck to body joint has been modified. Courtesy of Brompton's Auctioneers, London.

Fig.25

■ Front view, brand mark and soundboard bracing detail of a guitar à la Sagrini by Jean Charles Lullier, Boulogne sur Mer, c. 1830. Vibrating string length: 604 mm. Two interesting details of Lullier's interpretation of the model is the presence on the soundboard of a small reinforcement bar right beneath the first string, a feature commonly associated with Lacote. The number of frets is remarkable, too , because 18 frets are rarely seen, be it in a standard, or a terz guitar. Private collection, France. Pictures: E. P. Hofmann.

Fig.26

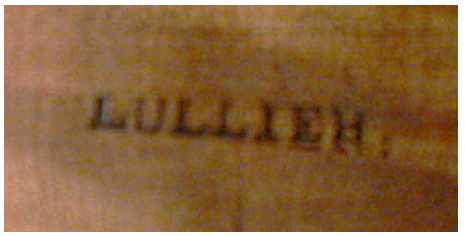


Fig.27

■ Front and back views of a guitar à la Sagrini by Dominique Roudhloff (alias “Roudhloff fils ainé”), Mirecourt, c.1828/30. Vibrating string length: 600 mm. Although it features 18 frets just like the model à la Sagrini by Lullier [fig. 23-27], it is otherwise very differently designed and made. Private collection, France. Pictures: E. P. Hofmann.

Fig.28

Fig.29

Fig.30

Fig.31

■ Side view and original brandmark of the guitar opposite. Please note that the purflings of soundboard and back made of different materials are an original feature that is quite common in guitars of the Mirecourt-School. Private collection, France. Pictures: E. P. Hofmann.

■ On the left: guitar à la Sagrini by Léopold Maurice Cabasse (alias "Cabasse Bernard"), Mirecourt, c. 1835. Vibrating string length: c. 590 mm. Courtesy of Gardiner Houlgate, Corsham.

■ On the right: guitar à la Sagrini by Charles Lété (alias "Léte ainé"), Mirecourt, c. 1828. Vibrating string length: c. 604 mm. The bridge and tailpiece are of course not original. Courtesy of Appolium.fr.

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig.34

Fig.35

■ Unidentified guitar à la Sagrini, probably Mirecourt, c.1828. Courtesy of Jean-Michel Renard, Bellenaves.

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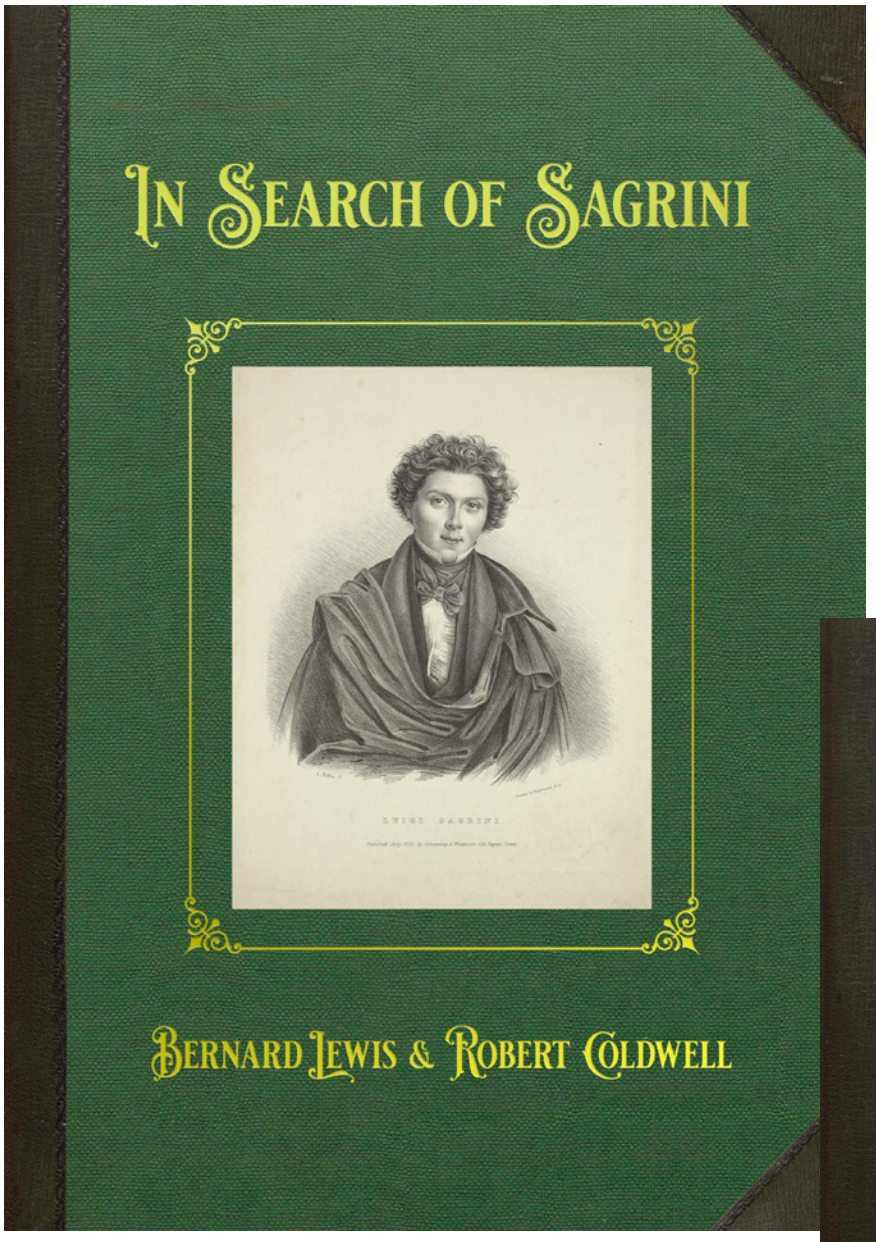

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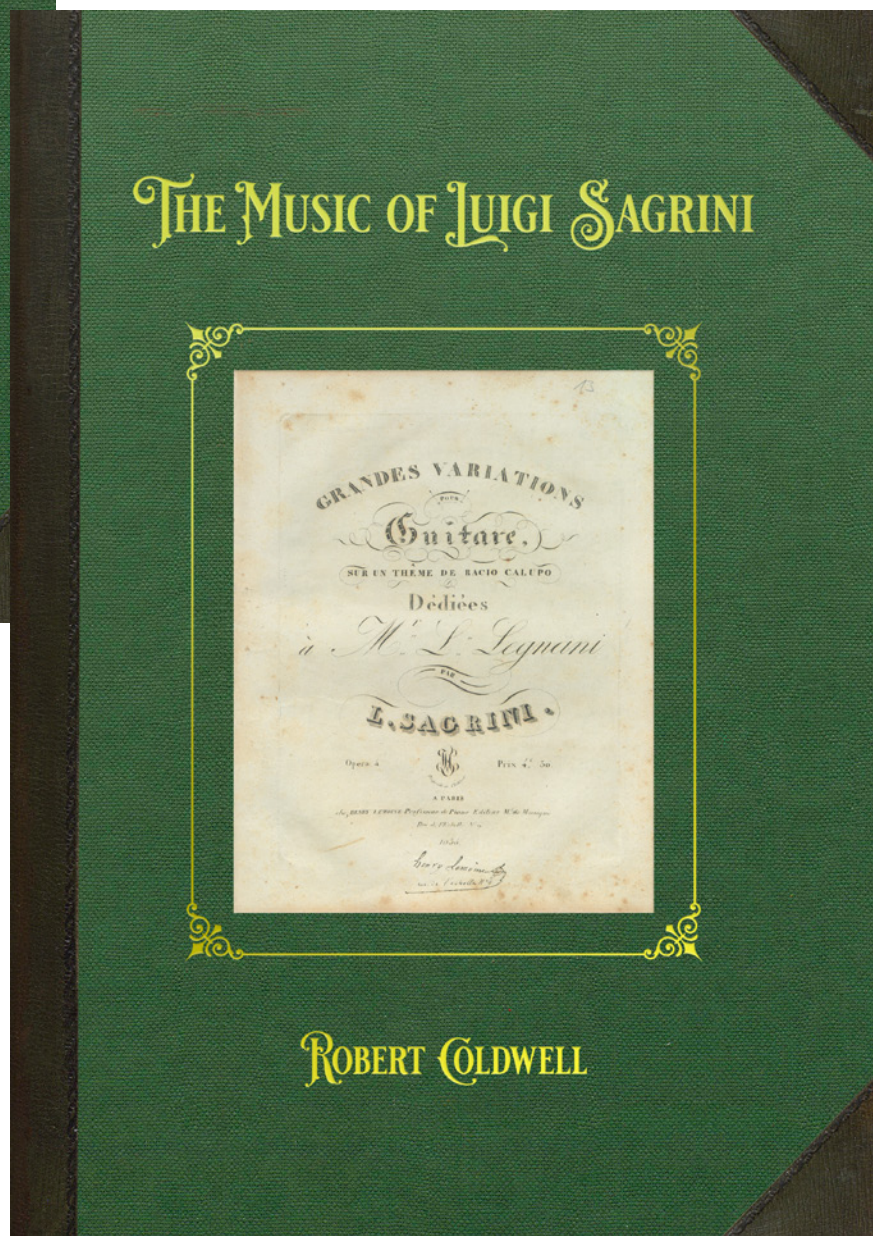

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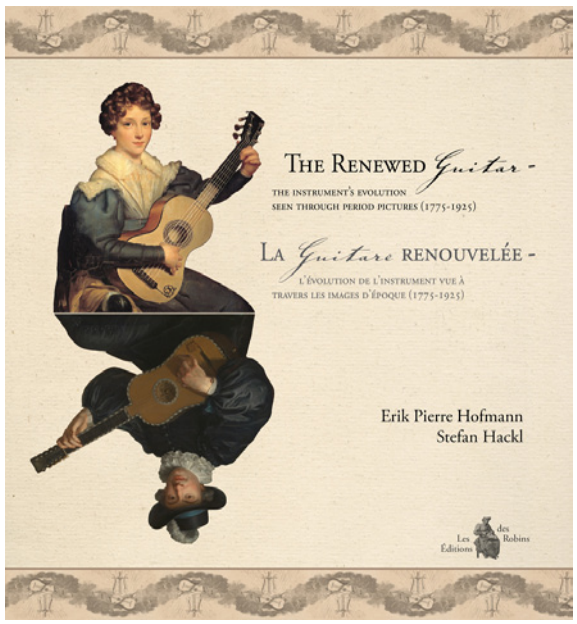

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