We have already noted that Fernando Sor was proficient in figured bass reading, which is a form of improvisation, and one that leads to a good grounding for composition. I shall contribute a paper to the subject in the not too distant future. Aguado contributes two other aspects of the improviser’s art: decoration of the written score, and the improvised prelude. I will discuss each in turn.

Decoration

“There is another kind of ornament which consists in varying the mechanism of some melodies; this should be simple so as not to distort the main idea, and like all types of ornament must be dictated by good taste. In the following example from Sor’s Fantasia, opus 7, the second bar has been varied in five ways.”

~ Some introductory remarks on 19th-century guitar performance practice ~
Part II - Improvisation
Rob MacKillop©
Very few of today’s players – even so-called early-music performers – are willing to take the plunge into this kind of decoration, yet an even cursory reading of the various books on stylistic practice would reveal that it was quite a normal, everyday thing to do, which is possibly why Aguado barely mentions it. Compare also Aguado’s ‘version’ of Sor’s ‘Grand Solo’. The underlying technical approach used in these instances by Aguado can best be learned through a study of his Preludes.

**Prelude**

Improvisation in 19th-century guitar performance practice is a very large topic. Later I shall discuss the improvised cadenza, but here I limit myself to a few passing comments by Aguado, and begin a study of the improvised prelude. In Chapter II, paragraph 6 of his method, Aguado mentions that the guitar is ‘an instrument suited for improvisation’, and the ‘Preludes or indications of the key in which a piece is to be played’ are excellent examples of Aguado’s improvisational style. Although a very common practice since medieval times, the improvised prelude has generally fallen out of use over the last century or so. I would like to see a return of the practice, and suggest that instead of slavishly copying and memorising Aguado’s examples, we study their content with a view to making our own.

Aguado gives twenty-two Preludes in the keys of C, G, A, D and E, but mentions that as some of them involve no open strings, they could be shifted chromatically to other keys. Furthermore, certain Preludes ‘can be played in the minor, if care is taken to make the third and sixth notes of the scale minor’. In other words, Aguado supplies us with enough material to perform a Prelude in any key, major or minor.

The first Prelude is the easiest, and in truth is quite banal. Despite being overly simple, it does what it is supposed to do, and what that is is revealed in Aguado’s subtitle: *indications of the key in which a piece is to be played*. The simplest way to do that is to state merely two chords: the tonic and the dominant.
Of course, more complicated examples are given. Prelude 16 is a fine and not untypical Prelude and will serve us as a good example to follow:

Crotchet beats 1 to 7 play with our inner demand for the establishment of a key. It starts on a single note, A [see figure A], the actual dominant note of the as yet unknown key. Of course, the audience does not know what key the piece is in. Is it the tonic, we wonder? The following four quavers seem to indicate that we are in the key of A major, but the G# is actually a chromatically sharpened lower auxiliary, as will be made evident from the next four quavers [figure B]. Here we have a repeat figuration, the high point of which (the G natural) is the seventh of the dominant seventh chord in the key of D major. The establishment of D major as the key is emphasised by both the minim time value [figure C] given to the first sounding of the note D (the longest-held note so far) and the sudden demisemiquaver D major run plummeting an octave to another D. But as soon as D major is firmly established, Aguado introduces a bass C natural [figure D] which indicates a modulation to the subdominant key of G major – emphasised again by a minim G followed by a fast
hemidemisemiquaver diatonic run up the G major scale to another G. The next quaver passage seems innocent enough: a simple G major arpeggio up to a high D. But is this D [figure E] the 5th note of G major, or is it a re-establishment of the tonic? Aguado repeats the note several times in short stabs (the inverted V shape above the note is described in paragraph 136iv by Aguado to indicate that the note must be quickly silenced, ‘by placing the same finger which plucked the note on the string immediately after’). Our uncertainty (conscious or otherwise) of the function of this high D is resolved in a surprise plummet to a low G# minim [figure F] (the true note length is uncertain), indicating a modulation to the dominant key of A major established at the start of the third line. Or is it? The high B minim falls as we expect to an A [figure G], but is now actually the fifth of a D major quaver arpeggio, which is followed by a descending demisemiquaver scale run of D (not A) major. This has only served to delay the actually sounding of the dominant chord of A major, indicated by a low A minim [figure H] followed by A and G# quavers, before the G natural indicates the final return to the tonic D major [figure I].

The above might have confused the issue or clarified it, depending on your own theoretical knowledge/appreciation, or otherwise. In its simplest form, we could say that Aguado merely points out the Tonic, Subdominant and Dominant areas of the key, much as Bach did in the Prelude to the so-called First Cello Suite, and indeed many of Aguado’s Preludes do just that. We could do something similar. The following outlines a method for building a very basic improvisation:

**Basic Model for an Improvised Prelude**

**Step 1:** choose a key. Try A major, a good guitar key. (See example score below).

**Step 2:** choose a chordal outline you wish to explore. Keeping it simple to start with, try the following: A D E A, in other words, Tonic, Subdominant, Dominant, Tonic. Play the chordal outline in simple block chords over and over until you can feel instinctively where you are heading.

**Step 3:** establish the tonic. This can be done simply by just playing an A major chord, or we could ‘play’ with our listener’s expectations by slightly delaying it (as in Prelude 16 above).

**Step 4:** Think of the many ways one could connect the first chord, A major, to the second chord in our outline, D major. Here it is a good idea to not merely land on D major, but to actually *modulate* to it. The simplest and most effective way of modulating to a new key is to introduce the Dominant seventh of the new key. In our example we must change the G# of the A major scale into a G natural which now functions as the seventh of an A7 chord, the Dominant seventh of D major. You might do a simple arpeggio of A major with a G natural on top which falls to an F# on top of a simple D major chord.

**Step 5:** establish your new key by either playing an arpeggio or playing an ascending or descending octave scale (with the notes of the new key – in our case, D major).

**Step 6:** connect the second chord of our original chord outline to the third chord – D major to E major. If we are modulating, we can again go via the dominant seventh of the new key. The dominant seventh of E major is B7, which includes a D#. We must therefore change our D to a D# before settling on the E major chord. You can do this in a similar way to Step 4, or you can try something different.

**Step 7:** establish the new key (as in Step 5): E major.
Step 8: connect the last two chords of our original chordal outline: E major and A major. As we have established the key of E major, we must turn it into an E7 chord if we want to modulate back to the original tonic, A major. In effect, this means introducing the note D natural – the seventh of an E7 chord. Again, we can play an E7 arpeggio or a scale run in A major from E up to D, which then heralds:

Step 9: Establish the tonic. This could be a simple statement of the chord of A major or something more elaborate. Aguado invariably opts for a simple statement of the final tonic chord.

Paragraph 280. In these preludes the metre is not strictly observed. The value of the notes serves only to give an idea of the respective speed at which a piece is to be played.\(^v\)

[More will be said on this aspect of ‘faking it’ when we come to discuss the improvised cadenza.]

And there you have it: a simple prelude based on Aguado’s practice. We need to explore ways of elaborating on our basic (rather boring, it must be said) outline, making it less obvious and more interesting. And that is the essence of a good prelude: to find interesting ways of connecting the two or three chords which well and truly establish a chosen key. And we must keep in mind that we are actually improvising a prelude to something, and give little hints, quotations maybe, from the main piece. We also need to be aware of the harmonic style of the composer. Mertz, for instance, might have used a minor chord for the subdominant. Look also at the many ways of connecting two chords, say A and E, in the works of Giuliani – there must be over a thousand examples! By memorising and varying some of these examples rhythmically and melodically, we can internalise them and eventually make them part of our own early 19th-century armory of improvising gestures (this is not
cheating as such, as almost all improvising traditions have their ‘licks’ or clichés which the would-be performer must first learn).

And it is but a short step away from improvising preludes to improvising cadenzas.

**Cadenza**
There are two types of cadenza. The first, and simplest, can be found in solo works and is usually indicated by a fermata. Here is an example from the *Rondeau de Concert* by Napoleon Coste:

What is of interest is the difference between full-size notes and small notes. Note the last two notes of the first line. Coste requires the performer to play these notes as written as they lead out of the cadenza into a new *Allegretto* section:

What is written in small notes is an *example* of the type of cadenza that could be played. Coste starts with a camouflaged but in essence simple arpeggio of a Dominant Seventh (with an added flattened ninth – an interval loved by almost all 19th-century guitarists, especially Giuliani), and follows with a chromatic run up to the compound fifth note, a B. The entire cadenza is simply a decoration of the dominant chord of the approaching key of A major. It should not prove impossible to do something similar ourselves. Later in the same piece, Coste provides us with yet another short cadenza on the same two chords. Again, both end with the B, B# climb into the C# of the tune:
The other type of cadenza can be found in the concertos of, among others, Mauro Giuliani.

The longer cadenza
Written only 20 years before Giuliani’s Op.30, D.G. Türk’s influential Clavierschule of 1789 provides us with a summary of good cadenza practice. His ten rules should be studied and memorised:

1. The cadenza should reinforce the impression made by the composition by providing a brief summary of it; this may be achieved by weaving some of the important ideas from the piece into the cadenza.
2. The cadenza should not be difficult for its own sake, but rather contain thoughts that are suited to the main character of the composition.
3. The cadenza should not be too long, especially in sad compositions.
4. Modulations should be avoided or used only in passing, and should never stray beyond the main keys established in the piece.
5. The cadenza, in addition to expressing a unified sentiment, must have some musical variety to maintain the listener’s interest.
6. Ideas should not be repeated, either in the same key or in different keys.
7. Dissonances, even in single-voiced cadenzas, must be properly resolved.
8. A cadenza need not be learnt, but should show ‘novelty, wit and abundance of ideas’.
9. In a cadenza the performer should not stay in one tempo or metre too long, but should give the impression of ‘ordered disorder’. A cadenza may be usefully compared to a dream, in which events that have been compressed into the space of a few minutes make an impression, yet lack coherence and clear consciousness.
10. A cadenza should be performed as though it had just occurred to the performer. Nevertheless, it is risky to improvise a cadenza on the spot, and much safer to write it down or at least sketch it in advance.
We shall use these ‘rules’ to analyse the main cadenza of the 1st movement of Giuliani’s Op.30.\textsuperscript{viii}

The cadenza begins with two simple arpeggios of the dominant chord, E major, before adding a D natural on the open 4\textsuperscript{th} string, the lowest available D. This D is restated in the highest possible register, and then again on the 2nd string, third fret. The D natural of course indicates a return of the tonic A major, and it is therefore good practice to make the audience aware of its presence and function.

But Giuliani is not yet ready to give us what we expect. There follows an E7th run in thirds, followed by a typical Giuliani figuration introducing the dominant lower auxiliary A#, which serves as a very brief ‘dominant of the dominant’. Descending 3rds then slide chromatically into an E7th arpeggio wherein the bass rises to an F natural, signifying an E7b9 chord, which is enharmonically substituted by Fdim7th.
Giuliani then plays with this ambiguity before emphatically announcing a high position E7 chord with the 7th on top:

Finally there is an E7 scale run complete with chromatic lower auxiliaries before quietly and calmly stating the open 5th string, the A we have been waiting for since the cadenza commenced.
One would have to read through the entire opening movement to be able to judge upon Turk’s first prerequisite, that the cadenza must weave together some of the important ideas of the piece. To save us the time, I can say that there is not much weaving going on at all, although Turk’s second rule is satisfied, that the cadenza contains thoughts that are suited to the main character of the composition. Turk goes on to say that the cadenza should not be too long, especially in slow movements. Giuliani’s written cadenza (as opposed to his performances) is not long at all; in fact it could be longer without upsetting the balance of the movement.

Rule 4 – there is not any real modulation taking place.
Rule 5 – it is a unified sentiment and variety is found in both rhythm and the introduction of lower auxiliaries.
Rule 6 – there is repetition – the opening arpeggio, for example – but not much.
Rule 7 – all the dissonances are properly resolved
Rule 8 – the cadenza must not be learnt. That is why the written cadenza must be treated as an example only. We could use some of it, should we wish, in our own attempt.
Rule 9 – ordered disorder: yes, that seems to be the case here.
Rule 10 – sketch a cadenza in advance.

So, Giuliani’s cadenza seems to conform in most respects to Turk’s rules, but deviates from them as well, but only slightly, as in the repetition of the opening arpeggio. Harmonically, all that is taking place over the four unbarred lines is a decoration of the movement from Dominant to Tonic.

In conclusion, to do justice to any composer’s music we should at least be aware of how he played and how that influenced his compositional style. The role of improvisation or decoration is central to early 19th-century performance practice and must be studied in a stylistically appropriate way for each composer.

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ii Ibid. p. 5.
iii Ibid., pages 110-112.
iv Ibid., p. 39.
v Ibid., p. 110.
vi Quoted in New Grove, ‘Cadenza’.