

Pablo de Sarasate: *Zapateado* for violin and piano, op. 23, no. 2

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ABSTRACT: Pablo de Sarasate was a famous Spanish violinist and composer, internationally recognized for his perfect technique and refined expressiveness. A defining aspect of his musical language is his closeness to Spanish folklore. Sarasate was fascinated by the diversity and colorfulness of the traditional music of the regions of Spain, which he masterfully transposed into his own compositions. This synthesis between popular music and academic art was essential in defining a personal aesthetic, in which traditional dances, specific modes and Iberian rhythms acquire a noble, stylized expressiveness. An eloquent example of this synthesis is the series of Spanish Dances for violin and piano, pieces directly inspired by the folk dances specific to the various regions of Spain, from Andalusia to Navarre. In the composition process, Sarasate did not limit himself to the simple transcription of folk melodies, but combined pre-existing elements of national folklore (including quotations from folk songs, some taken from famous contemporary composers, others coming from anonymous oral tradition) with his own means of artistic expression. Thus, the Spanish Dances are not only works of violin virtuosity, but also creations of profound cultural authenticity.

KEYWORDS: Sarasate; Spanish; dances; violin; piano; analysis;

Introduction

Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908) was a famous Spanish violinist and composer, internationally recognized for his perfect technique and refined expressiveness. Born in Pamplona, northern Spain, Sarasate demonstrated from an early age an extraordinary aptitude for music, especially for violin. At just eight years old, he gave his first public concert, astonishing audiences with his mastery of instrumental technique and the musical naturalness with which he interpreted difficult pieces.

His exceptional talent led him to further studies at the Paris Conservatory, where

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he became one of the most highly regarded students of his time. Throughout his career, Sarasate performed in the most important halls in the world, to the acclaim of European and American audiences alike. He was often compared to other great violinists of the time, such as Joseph Joachim or Henri Vieuxtemps, but his unique style, influenced by his Iberian roots, clearly differentiated him from his contemporaries.

In addition to his performing career, Sarasate was also a prolific composer. His works, mainly dedicated to the violin, highlight the technical and expressive potential of the instrument to the fullest. He composed numerous works for violin and orchestra, including the famous *Fantasias concertantes* on operatic themes (such as those from *Carmen* by Bizet or *Faust* by Gounod), as well as an impressive number of miniatures for violin and piano, virtuoso works that have secured him a significant place in the violin repertoire (Sagadia, 1977).

A defining aspect of Sarasate's musical language is his closeness to Spanish folklore. The violinist was fascinated by the diversity and colorfulness of the traditional music of the regions of Spain, which he masterfully transposed into his own compositions. This synthesis between popular music and academic art was essential in defining a personal aesthetic, in which traditional dances, specific modes and Iberian rhythms acquire a noble, stylized expressiveness. The series of *Spanish Dances* for violin and piano serves as a compelling illustration of this synthesis. Composed between 1877 and 1882, the collection was initiated by Sarasate and released by German publisher Fritz Simrock, in four volumes: Book I (Op. 21, 1878), Book II (Op. 22, 1879), Book III (Op. 23, 1880) and Book IV (Op. 26, 1882), each featuring iconic pieces such as the *Malagueña*, *Zapateado*, *Romanza andaluza* and *Vito* (Nagore-Ferrer, 2017).

These works are directly inspired by the folk dances specific to the various regions of Spain (from Andalusia to Navarra) and reflect a special rhythmic and melodic richness. In the composition process, Sarasate did not limit himself to the simple transcription of folk melodies, but combined pre-existing elements of national folklore (including quotations from folk songs, some taken from famous contemporary composers, others coming from anonymous oral tradition) with his own means of artistic expression. Thus, the Spanish Dances are not only works of violin virtuosity, but also creations of profound cultural authenticity.

Interpretative landmarks and technical rigor

Zapateado, op. 23, no. 2 by Pablo de Sarasate is a famous work in the violin repertoire, appreciated for its spectacular virtuosity and authentic Spanish character. *Zapateado* is part of the *Spanish Dances*, op. 23, being the second piece of this notebook, published in 1880.

The title refers to a traditional Spanish dance, specific to the Andalusia region,

characterized by the rapid and rhythmic beating of the dancer's feet on the floor (in Spanish, the word *zapato* means shoe). *Zapateado*, renowned for its vivacity and overflowing energy, is closely linked to the tradition of *flamenco* music, but also to the influences of gypsy music, both characterized by a special expressive force and an ardent temperament. *Flamenco* is a musical genre that emerged and developed in Spain, especially in the Andalusia region, characterized by a pronounced rhythm through the use of castanets (Laiu-Despău, 2007). Sarasate transposes all these characteristics musically with remarkable refinement and verve.

The work is composed in the key of *A major*, in 6/8 time and follows a free *rondeau* form, in which we will find contrasting sections that alternate in terms of themes and timbres, yet maintain their interdependence through an *ostinato* rhythm and the recurrence of the principal motifs (Teodorescu-Ciocănea, 2014). The overall structure is marked by the character of a *perpetuum mobile* (with the exception of the changing stanzas) and can be divided into four harmonic sections: A (*A Major*) - B (*D major*) - C (*D minor*) - A (*A major*).

The work opens in *Allegro*, with a short 19-measure Introduction; this energetic theme, first presented by the piano (mm. 1-14), is inspired by another *Zapateado*, composed for voice and piano by Isidoro Hernández and included in his album *Flores de España* (Pomés Jiménez, 2018). In the two figures below, we observe that Sarasate will retain the rhythmic pattern of measure 6/8, but will modify the tonality by replacing *D major* with *A major*:



Figure 1a Isidoro Hernández, *Zapateado* from *Flores de España*, mm. 13–17¹



Figure 1b Sarasate, *Zapateado*, op. 23, mm. 1 - 10²

¹ Note. Image from https://www.academia.edu/45563594/PABLO_SARASATES_SPANISH_DANCES_A_CONTEXTUAL_STUDY_AND_FLUTE_TRANSCRIPTIONS [Thesis_submitted_in_fulfillment_of_the_Degree_of_Doctor_of_Philosophy_in_Music_Performance], licensed under CC0

² Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

In the final five measures of the Introduction (mm. 15 - 19), the violin takes the lead through a very exuberant anacrusis *solo* passage, organized in repeated eighths of the sound *E* at perfect octave intervals in three different registers, with the role of preparing the appearance of the Refrain.

Stanza A (Refrain), built from two periods of wide breathing, $a = 15$ measures (20 - 34) and $a1 = 25$ measures (35 - 59), presents an extremely rhythmic and bouncy theme on the violin, based on a dotted rhythm, danced in *staccato* and *spiccato*. The Refrain-Theme has an energetic, rhythmic character, marked by precise accents and syncopations and is enriched with ornaments and double strings, doubled by an active and dynamic articulation of the fingers of the left hand:



Figure 2 Sarasate, *Zapateado*, op. 23, mm. 13 - 26³

In the first section, is required a controlled *spiccato*. It should be practiced first slowly, then with a metronome, gradually increasing the *tempo*. The rhythmic beats must be clearly marked in 6/8, without omitting the accents on the weak beats. The piano provides the harmonic basis of *A major* through an energetic *ostinato* rhythm, which imitates the guitar. It actively participates in the musical dialogue, sometimes taking over independent thematic fragments or creating dynamic echoes in coordination with the violin.

In the following period $a1$ (mm. 35 - 59), the musical discourse of the violin is enriched with various double stops, scalar passages in the high register and artificial scalar harmonics, which are alternated according to the dynamic evolution and emotional register changes of the melody. The double stops are used to highlight strong nuances (*f* and *ff*), while the harmonics and high register notes emphasize the contrasting, blurred character of the softer dynamics (*p*). In order to convey the general character of

³ Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

the piece (playful, full of verve, explosive, yet controlled), we must understand the percussive nature of the dance, emphasizing energy, rhythm and brilliance. The short phrases, thrown with precision, are constructed like exchanges in a *flamenco* duel between the dancer and the guitar.

The final nine measures of the secondary period (mm. 51 - 59), built in the form of an external expansion (4 + 4 + 1), have the role of completing and concluding the end of the first section through the cadential repetition of the I - V - I progression. This melody was taken by Sarasate from the Zarzuela *La guerra Santa* by Emilio Arrieta, entitled *Canción de Carranza*, no. 9 (Pomés Jiménez, 2018).

Zarzuela is a genre of Spanish musical performance, similar to *operetta* in which spoken dialogue is alternated with singing and dancing scenes (Corominas, 1980). The original melody, built through the *ostinato* repetition of some arpeggial-type figures, is transposed on the violin from the key of *E major* to the key of *A major* and subsequently enriched by adding the left-hand *pizzicato* technique alternating with *legato* to emphasize Sarasate's characteristic violin virtuosity:



Figure 3a E. Arrieta, *Canción de Carranza*, no. 9, *La guerra Santa* (mm. 1 - 11)⁴



Figure 3b Sarasate, *Zapateado*, op. 23, mm. 50 - 58⁵

⁴ Note. Image from

[https://www.academia.edu/45563594/PABLO_SARASATES_SPANISH_DANCES_A_CONTEXTUAL_STUDY_AND_FLUTE_TRANSCRIPTIONS_Thesis_submitted_in_fulfillment_of_the_Degree_of_Doctor_of_Philosophy_in_Music_Performance], licensed under CC0

⁵ Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

From a technical and interpretative standpoint, in this section we must clearly differentiate between passages played expressively in *legato* (through precise control of the bow pressure on the string, intelligent bow distribution and the use of an wide *vibrato* adapted to the broad-breathing phrases) and those constructed in a *veloce* character (by achieving flexibility in the fingers joints and right-hand wrist, controlling the intonation in high positions and by maintaining the clarity of the left-hand finger articulation).

Stanza B (mm. 60 - 105) opens in *D major* and is composed as a contrasting episode, lyrical and slightly melancholic, yet still in an Iberian spirit. This section, also organized in two periods: b = 27 measures (60 - 86) and b1 = 19 measures (87 - 105), features a musical discourse for the violin based on the same dynamic and character alternation characteristic of the previous section:



Figure 4 Sarasate, Zapateado, op. 23, mm. 62 – 74⁶

Short lyrical fragments alternated rapidly with passages of an explosive, improvisational character, achieved through various violinistic techniques (varied bowing styles, such as *staccato*, *legato* or *spiccato*, double stops and three-note chords, wide-interval leaps, left-hand *pizzicato* alternated right-hand *pizzicato*), all of which require a controlled mastery of instrumental virtuosity. The final eight measures (95 - 102) of the secondary stanza, reintroduce the theme from Emilio Arrieta's *Zarzuela*, presented this time in *D major*.

Through a brief three-measure modulating passage (mm. 103 - 105), the composer transitions from *D major* to its parallel minor to prepare the appearance of the section C (mm. 106 - 178). This episode of violin bravura is organized into four periods: period c = 17 measures (106 - 122), period c1 = 16 measures (123 - 138), period c2 = 24 measures (139 - 162) and period c3 = 16 measures (163 - 178).

The foundational key of this section is *D minor*, with the exception of the final period c3, which suddenly shifts to *D major*. Each period of this section is organized into

⁶ Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

two symmetrical phrases, thematically similar, which are slightly enriched rhythmically and melodically following a variational pattern.

The first phrase of period c is constructed from ascending and descending scalar passages, marked by dramatic accents; the secondary phrase is varied rhythmically (through diminution), melodically (through the addition of passing tones) and technically (through the use of a spectacular bowing technique called flying *staccato*):



Figure 5 Sarasate, *Zapateado*, op. 23, mm. 106 - 122⁷

Unlike period c1, which is more lyrical, periods c2 and c3 are characterized by instrumental virtuosity; to underline and differentiate the contrasting nature of these thematic episodes, a breath must be created between the expressive arch of the lyrical section and the fireworks characteristic of the bravura passages:



Figure 6 Sarasate, *Zapateado*, op. 23, mm. 139 – 162⁸

⁷ Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

⁸ Note. Image from [[https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_\(Sarasate,_Pablo_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Spanish_Dances,_Op.23_(Sarasate,_Pablo_de))], licensed under CC0

Through a nine-measure transition (mm. 179 - 187), constructed on an eighth-note *ostinato* pedal on *D*, the *Refrain* (mm. 188 - 227) is reintroduced. This final stanza unfolds identically in both theme and character, following the initial pattern.

Virtuosic passages are defined by spectacular bowing techniques such as flying *staccato*, *sautillé* or *ricochet*; these nearly acrobatic sections, rich in both technically and ornamentally variety, culminate in a triumphant final character. To master these articulations, it is recommended to practice in small groups of three or four notes per bow stroke, which allows the performer to sense the natural weight of the stick on the string, ensuring a spontaneous rather than forced bounce.

The composer also brings to attention other virtuoso violin techniques based on rapid scales and arpeggios passages, diversified by natural and artificial harmonics and alternating with on wide-interval leaps in the high register. The wide and warm *vibrato* in the melodic section must be alternated with the rapid and intense one in the tense passages. For each thematic evolution, the color of the timbral palette must be diversified. It is recommended to vary the articulation of the left-hand fingers in order to achieve differentiated musical expressivity.

Practicing in slow *tempo* is advised, using short fragments of four to eight measures, focusing attention on resolving each specific problem before accelerating. Work should also include simulating the performance in front of a mirror or a fictional audience, while emphasizing body expressivity to support the character of the piece through stage presence.

It is recommended to practice intonational accuracy on the double stops, both in lower positions and in the high register. Technical passages should be studied slowly, without *vibrato*, adding expression only later. Perfect synchronization between the left hand and the bow is essential. Left-hand *pizzicato* should be practiced separately, then alongside the bow to achieve coordination between both hands; this can create a theatrical yet precise effect. The differentiated use of *staccato* and *legato* combinations can highlight dramatic accents. The variety of attacks will evoke the impression of a *flamenco* improvisation. Finally, intelligent dynamic development can be achieved through the use of sudden contrasts (*pp* - *ff*).

This vibrant work, inspired by traditional dance from Andalusia, combines the energy of *flamenco* with the refinement of romantic virtuosity, an explosive dialogue between Iberian temperament and pure violin technique. Zapateado is more than a bravura piece; it is an artistic statement, an explosion of color and rhythm that requires the violinist not only mastery of technique, but also an authentic stage presence and Spanish expressiveness. The ideal performer does not just play the piece, but dances with the bow.

Conclusions

Through his work, Pablo de Sarasate made a decisive contribution to the affirmation of a Spanish musical identity in the landscape of European classical music and influenced entire generations of violinists and composers. His refined style, interpretative elegance and passion for folklore remain a source of inspiration in the world of violin music to this day.

Zapateado, op. 23, no. 2 is today one of the most popular and frequently performed works by Sarasate, being a regular in international violin competitions and solo recitals. Although it is part of the bravura repertoire, its musical value is not reduced to virtuosity because the piece has an authentic power of expression, which transcends technical difficulties.

Zapateado is an emblematic work for Sarasate's style: spectacular, virtuoso, deeply connected to the roots of Spanish culture. The piece perfectly synthesizes his artistic vision, an art of technical brilliance and Iberian passion, and remains one of the most technically demanding in the entire Romantic repertoire for violin.

The utilized violin techniques include:

- Various bowing features, such as *spiccato* and *sautillé*, employed to convey a rapid and percussive dance-like impression, or *ricochet*, where the bow bounces in a controlled manner on the strings to produce notes groupings in a single bow stroke;
- Double stops and natural and artificial harmonics, which embellish the texture and add color;
- Virtuoso passages in high positions, often alternating with rapid position changes;
- Left-hand *pizzicato* alternated with *staccato* and *legato*.

All these elements are used without a purpose; they serve the characteristic Spanish dance style of the *Zapateado*. The rhythm is accentuated, incisive, evoking exactly the pulsation of *flamenco*. Syncopation, eighth-note and sixteenth-note groupings and dotted values are frequently employed. Although the meter is 6/8, the auditory effect suggests an alternation between ternary and binary structures, leading the piece a vivid and unpredictable character. The melodies have a modal outline (influenced by folk modes, especially Dorian and Phrygian), often based on ornamented Spanish scales. Rapid descending motifs frequently appear, reminiscent of the vocal ornamentation of songs from Andalusia. Although the piece is conceived for violin and piano, the accompanying instrument is not a simple passive accompanist. In certain sections, the piano provides a compact orchestral texture, imitating the *flamenco* guitar through *staccato* chords and accentuated rhythms.

Sarasate does not only pursue technical effect, but creates a piece with a clear national identity. *Zapateado* is a demonstration of mastery and at the same time an

expression of the Spanish temperament: passionate and intense. Each musical phrase is thought out with precision, but also with apparent spontaneity, evoking a dancer improvising in real time. Through this stylistic recall, the composer manages to create a strongly suggestive atmosphere, in which music becomes a profound language, capable of transposing the listener into a sound universe dominated by movement and pure emotion. This vibrant impression not only captures attention, but also stirs the senses, remaining deeply imprinted in the affective memory of those who listen to it. The composer combines the essential characteristics of the noise produced by shoes during dancing (where anacrusic and syncopated rhythmic cells are marked by clear accents) with the various virtuoso violin techniques to enhance the restless and impulsive character, as if born from an irresistible inner need for liberation and the affirmation of a tumultuous identity. The intensity of the music conveys to the listener a sensation of continuous tension, but also of freedom and passion.

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