

Review: Marianne Tansman's "La guitare dans la vie d'Alexandre Tansman" (2018)¹

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Abstract: This is a review of Marianne Tansman's book *La guitare dans la vie d'Alexandre Tansman*, written in 2018. The book consists of a chronological account of the composer's relation with the guitar and with the guitarist Andrés Segovia, and produces remarks both on the style and particularities of Tansman's works for guitar as well as broader considerations on Tansman's artistic point of view. By the end of the text, it is compared to other works on the issue of the guitar in the life of Tansman, and some directions for further research on the subject are suggested.

Keywords: Classical Guitar; Alexandre Tansman; Musical Biography; Andrés Segovia

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The book *La guitare dans la vie d'Alexandre Tansman*, written by Marianne Tansman and published in France by Editions Habanera, 2018, was produced after a lecture held by the composer's daughters, Marianne Tansman-Martinozzi and Mireille Tansman-Zanutini, in collaboration with Antonin Vercellino. The lecture was named "La guitare dans la vie d'Alexandre Tansman" and took place in Lyon on January 27th, 2018, and its elaboration began with the composition of the piece *Arabesque, Hommage à Alexandre Tansman*, written for solo guitar by Kilbéric Deltroy. The text's form comprises basically a chronological overview of the composer's life, with special emphasis on his relationship with the guitar and the Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia. The elaboration of Tansman's history with the guitar is conducted in a chronological way and gravitates around a presentation of Tansman's works for guitar and letters exchanged between the composer and Segovia regarding such compositions. At the end of the book, a section investigates the recent edition and publication of works which were not published – back when composer and guitarist were alive. It produces remarks on why certain pieces may not have been concluded, and also foresees some future publications regarding the completion of unedited works.

On considering the guitar in the life of Alexandre Tansman, Marianne Tansman begins by looking for the instrument in the cultural heritage of the composer; according to her, the guitar is not an instrument to be found in Polish or Yiddish folklore, and one has to go back to the 17th century in order to find any polish composer who wrote for the lute or some similar kind of instrument (TANSMAN, 2018: 15). Mentions of a first contact with the guitar in Tansman's life place such an event somewhere before 1925, in one of the Parisian nightly gatherings of the *Revue Musicale*. During the *soirée*, Andrés Segovia played J. S. Bach's *Chaconne in D minor* (a part of BWV 1004); his performance caught Tansman's attention and drove him to compose a Mazurka for the guitarist. This story relates to the one told by Tansman regarding the moment he decided to become a composer; in his own words: "I became a composer by accident. One day, I was eight years old, I was taken to a concert of Eugène Ysaÿe. He played Bach's *Chaconne* and then I decided to become a composer" (TANSMAN apud TANSMAN, 2018: 7)⁴. The importance of Bach's music (and to some extent baroque music in general) for Tansman is outlined by Marianne Tansman; she writes that this first contact with Bach's music started a relationship that

⁴ All quotations from Marianne Tansman's book have been translated from French by the authors of this review.

would become "(...) a constant throughout his creative journey" (TANSMAN, 2018: 7).

One of the means by which the relationship between Tansman and Segovia is explained is through Segovia's search for new repertoire for his instrument and Tansman's writing of pieces portraying Polish influences. Marianne Tansman writes: "Segovia was looking for a new repertoire in order to popularize his instrument, and what could be more original and unusual than presenting something strictly Polish" (TANSMAN, 2018: 22). The issue of Nationalism is one that is always around when referring to Tansman and his compositions. In this book, one of the occasions the matter is brought to the foreground is when Marianne Tansman describes his decision of pursuing French nationality as a reaction to what he felt as the neglect of his native country toward his art: "Henceforth disappointed by the silence of Poland regarding his works, he applied for French citizenship" (TANSMAN, 2018: 30).

When commenting on the fact that the *Concertino pour guitare et orchestra* (1945) was not played around the time it was composed, but only much later, Marianne Tansman writes that it may have been so because the piece was "(...) perhaps too far from his [Segovia's] romantic taste, of his refusal of all atonality" (TANSMAN, 2018: 36). With this and other commentaries throughout the book, the author implies that one of the aspects important to the professional relation between Tansman and Segovia was that the composer had to adapt his compositional expertise to a certain style of composition, which would refer to baroque and romantic elements and which also required the joint effort of composer and guitarist in making it feasible in terms of instrumental possibilities, as Marianne Tansman notes: "most of the time, Tansman forgot that the acrobatic feats playable by the fingers at the piano were not possible (given the width of the hand and fingers) on the strings of the guitar" (TANSMAN, 2018: 46). The author produces, later in the book, an account of some correspondence between Segovia and Tansman regarding the discussion of the technical feasibility of the *Variations sur un thème de Scriabine*. After having received the scores for the *Variations...*, Segovia wrote: "At first glance all [variations] seem guitaristic to me save certain passages of the third one. I will try to arrange or shall ask you to modify what turns out difficult in terms of technical liquidity. They are very beautiful. (SEGOVIA apud TANSMAN: 54). But then, after showing the scores to his student Alvaro Company⁵ and having heard his comments on the music, he wrote to Tansman: "He complains, as I have complained to you some times that you write using the E, A,

⁵ Composer, guitarist and teacher born in Italy on 1931, Alvaro Company studied guitar under the tutelage of Andrés Segovia at the *Accademia Chigiana* in Siena between the years 1950-1954.

D, G, B, E, tuning, and suddenly you employ a low D..." (SEGOVIA apud TANSMAN, 2018: 64-65). Comparing the manuscript with the version revised by Alvaro Company, one can notice several changes which Company thought were needed so that the piece could be played properly. Nevertheless, we nowadays have the opportunity to hear both the Company version and a version based on the original score, which was recorded by Alberto la Rocca. In the latter, one can hear several passages which make use of the "low D" mentioned by Segovia.

According to Marianne Tansman, one of the important pieces concerning this aspect of Tansman and Segovia's relationship was the *Cavatine*, written in 1950. Marianne Tansman writes that after working with the guitarist on this composition, Tansman "shall be better informed on the guitarist's preferences and seems henceforth to be conscious enough of what befits the instrument in terms of genre" (TANSMAN, 2018: 40). This notion is further reinforced by the author's reflections on the choice of the title *Cavatine*: "Without doubt, the composer chose such a title in order to define its lyrical and poetical genre, somewhat antique" (TANSMAN, 2018: 40).

Also worthy of note in this work is how Marianne Tansman describes Alexandre Tansman as a figure who was not eager to engage in educational activities:

[Tansman] was never very much at ease when it came to teaching, having always refused to do so at any conservatory. He often lent his aid in replacing, on certain occasions, friends such as Milhaud or Nadia Boulanger, he participated in the jury of conservatory competitions and others, sometimes guitar competitions under Segovia's invitation, and he had some temporary students to whom he was able to give, above all, advice (TANSMAN, 2018: 52).

To Marianne Tansman, Alexandre Tansman distanced himself from the educational domain mainly because he believed musical life was undergoing a process excessively concerned with the modes of expression and not concerned enough with the *content* to be expressed:

In a certain sense, we are witnessing today a musical life based more on imposed 'slogans' than on the natural play of creative imagination and constructive intelligence. [...] The oppositions and denominations of adepts of different schools manifest themselves exclusively on the plane of language, on the individualized or depersonalized system of writing, leaving aside all concerns with the very principle of having a content to express (TANSMAN apud TANSMAN, 2018: 52).

Marianne's report of Tansman's relationship with the guitar, in its chronological form, goes

through events of the composer's life which are also emphasized in other biographical accounts of Tansman⁶. The first of those is the moment when he decided to become a composer, having heard Eugene Ysaïe's performance of Bach's *Chaconne in D minor*. Another narrative which is frequently brought up is that even though the composer did not know other composers who were experimenting with polytonality and atonality, he produced such experiments on his own⁷. After that, we have the account of how he won three prizes at a composition contest right before going to Paris⁸, where another recurring narrative is brought to attention: his friendship with the French composer Maurice Ravel, whom eventually introduced Tansman to Serge Koussevitsky, another figure described as crucial in Tansman's career. One could also not forego mentioning the "Around the World tour"⁹, as it is here described as important in the formation of Tansman, not just musically (as implied by the report of him meeting Gandhi) but also in terms of the musical materials he encountered (and to some extent possibly assimilated?). Lastly, the exile in the USA is commented upon from different angles; one of them, in the composer's words, is put out in a narrative which establishes a link between Hollywood and Weimar, thus alluding to what once was an European cultural center in describing the culture of Hollywood between 1941-1945: "Tansman described the Hollywood of these years [1941 – 1945] as a kind of Weimar where a number of writers [...], musicians [...], actors and scientists could be found, most of them exiled for the same reasons" (TANSMAN, 2018: 32).

Further research on the relationship of Tansman with the guitar could investigate ways in which the

⁶ See TANSMAN-ZANUTTINI; HUGON (2005), OTERO (2011), TIMMONS; FRÉMAUX (1998), HUGON (1998)

⁷ "While discussing Tansman's harmony it is necessary to mention polytonality, which the composer used intuitively for the first time in Polish Album for piano in 1916. It is important to emphasize that Tansman's 'discovery' of polytonality occurred independently of Darius Milhaud and Igor Stravinsky. [10] In his polytonal compositions, Tansman most often opposed two keys in the tritone relation" (GRANAT-JANKI, 2001).

⁸ "During the 30s [1930], Paris was the artistic centre *par excellence*. The city was a privileged place of many musicians. Amongst those, we can cite Alexandre Tansman, who obtained in 1919 the three first prizes of the first national composition contest organized in Poland. This success inspired him in the decision of moving to Paris. He obtains his passport from the Polish president, then President of the Council, the famous Ignacy Jan Paderewski, he himself a renowned pianist and talented composer" (JANSSENS, 2006: 24, author's translation).

⁹ "In the years 1932-1933 Tansman made a trip around the world commencing from the United States and visiting Hawaii, Japan, China, Indonesia, India, and Egypt. The travels ended in Italy. He synthesized his impressions and memories from the journeys in the cycle of fifteen miniature piano pieces entitled *The World Tour in the Miniature*. These brief program compositions include musical representations of Tansman's aural experiences: birdsong in Shanghai, gongs in a temple in Hong-Kong, and the gamelan in Bali, among other impressions. In representing "exotic" musics, the composer used either original folk melodies or the products of his imagination, but the latter ones retained the features of the authentic melodies" (GRANAT-JANKI, 2001).

composer's writing for the instrument differs from his writing for other instruments. It would also be interesting to investigate the existence of shared aspects between Tansman's writing for guitar with that of other "Segovian" composers, especially those who had "labels" in common (e.g. "neoclassical") with Tansman. Still another endeavor would be to look for musical passages portraying some of the characteristics Marianne Tansman lists as she discusses the composer's style (TANSMAN, 2018: 25-28). Though the topics pointed out by the author are clear, this effort could be enriched by the identification of passages which would serve as an illustration of each topic in the composer's music – the last characteristic pointed out by Marianne Tansman is "the neo-baroque element [...] which he employs on his fugue-like finales or his adagios and elegies" (TANSMAN, 2018: 28); immediately, two of Tansman's guitar works come to mind: the *Variations sur un theme de Scriabine*, with a fugue as its last variation, and the *Danza Pomposa*, which has a fugato in its B section. Another piece that comes to mind is the *Pièce en forme de passacaille*, published in *Alexandre Tansman: Posthumous Works for Guitar* (2003), by Gilardino and Biscaldi. An effort similar in kind to the one just described is carried on by Granat-Janki (2001) on investigating the notions of tradition and modernity in the music of the composer.

One of the points in which the book is lacking is the identification of documents cited, despite the fact that some of the letters cited are presented in the annex; in this sense, the compilation *Une voie lyrique dans une siècle bouleversé*, published in 2005 by Mireille Tansman-Zanuttini and Gérald Hugon, provides much more detailed information as to where the texts came from, as well as when and where they were originally published. The absence of a clear method of reference to individual texts – and therefore of a list of works cited – is something that cannot go unnoticed.

We would recommend this book for researchers of Alexandre's Tansman's guitar music, since apart from it the only documents which approach the composer's relationship with Segovia and the guitar are Corazón Otero's *Alexandre Tansman: His life and works for the guitar* (2011) and Frederic Zigante's foreword on Gilardino and Biscaldi's *Alexandre Tansman: Posthumous Works for Guitar* (2003).

In conclusion, we would point out that this review aims at contributing to knowledge regarding some intermingling aspects: the highlighting of Tansman's relationship with Segovia evokes the issue of canonicity as it allows us to contemplate Tansman's life and works in relation to a "minor instrument" in the Canon of "high art" (i.e. the classical guitar) – and the composer's participation in Segovia's mission of creating a repertoire of modern works for guitar which would ascertain the instrument's status

throughout the world's concert rooms. One of the characteristics of this composer-guitarist relationship was the particularities regarding the means of expression; Tansman had a favorable posture toward the tradition of his craft, and Segovia had a certain flair for musical language from the Baroque and Romantic periods, which further conditioned the production of their work. Furthermore, the review reflects upon considerations on the issue of neoclassicism, the relation of the composer to tradition and to the *avant-garde*, as well as his relation to other musicians who had "a higher standing" within the pantheon of Western "high art", such as Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky, relationships mentioned by the composer himself as intimate and significant in his life and music¹⁰. Glimpses of the production and refinement of these works for guitar may furthermore contribute to our understanding of the relation between composer and interpreter in the process of creating a new composition together; for though one may argue that the compositional craft is but the composer's, reasons that limit and shape the creative process – such as those commented above, as well as requests made by the interpreter in the moment of a work's commission or alterations made in the score so that, in the judgement of the latter, the general musical idea may be better represented – may well be in part attributed to the personality of the interpreter in such a relationship. To sum it up in a somewhat broad sense, contemplating Marianne Tansman's account informs us a little bit more not only on the composer's relation to the guitar but also on notions of tradition and neoclassicism in Tansman's life and works.

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¹⁰ For a discussion on legitimizing discourses in music, an issue which may further complexify some of the topics brought up in this paragraph, see CASTEL ES, 2016.

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