

In search of François de Fossa

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Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I wish to apologize in advance for my faulty pronunciation of your beautiful language. It is already many years since I was last invited to speak in French, and I am definitely out of practice.

What I am about to tell you is not a musicological discussion, but a detective story. It is not about how I found François de Fossa, but on how he, a composer/guitarist who lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century, found me across the barriers of time.

Some thirty years ago, I was living in Concord, New Hampshire. Among my usual distractions at the time was playing the guitar in a small chamber music group. At the time, there was not much music available for guitar and other instruments, and pretty soon we exhausted the available repertoire, Boccherini quintets, the Schubert Quartet, the Kreutzer trio, the Paganini works and a few other pieces of the kind. It was time to search for more. Looking in a library I found the Thematic Catalogue of the works of Boccherini by Yves Gérard. And in this book, I found the information about the *Sinfonia in C Major* by Boccherini which included a part for the guitar as a member of the orchestra. This sounded interesting, so I wrote to the “Bibliothèque de l’Opéra” in Paris, where the autograph manuscript was kept. They sent me a microfilm of the entire score. At that point in my life I was not a musicologist, but a performing musician, earning a living as a professional airline pilot. I really had no idea what to do with a microfilm, until one of my musician friends suggested that I should go to the local public library where they should have machines that can read microfilms. The visit to the library was disappointing. No, they did not have microfilm readers, after all this is a very small town and there is never any call for such machines, but I was told, I should go to the State Library and they surely would have what I need. The city of Concord is the capital of the State of New Hampshire, and the State Library is the official depository of all legal and political documents, the various local newspapers, land surveys and other such material so far away from anything to do with music.

When I approached the reference librarian at the State Library, ready to interrogate her about microfilm readers, I noticed behind her a small catalogue card cabinet with a sign on it which said:

Music.

That was strange for an archive of local legal documents, so I asked the librarian if she knows anything about that card catalogue cabinet with music. She turned around, looked at it with utter surprise, and said to me:

“I have never seen this before.”

“What do you mean, this was just installed behind you a few minutes ago?” I asked.

“No”, she replied, “I have been sitting at this desk for 27 years, and it was always there, but I never noticed that the sign said MUSIC”.

So, with her permission, I started reading the cards. This was apparently a very large collection of music that some good citizen donated to the State Library a generation or two before, and no one paid attention to it. I immediately found there a collection of guitar music. Some of it was music by composers I knew well, and pieces of music I played all my life, but a few things were totally new to me. One of the things that immediately caught my eyes was a composition for guitar, variations on the *Folies d’Espagne* by one François de Fossa, a composer whose name I have never heard before. I obtained copies of the music and took it home to play.



There are many sets of variations of the theme of *Folies d'Espagne*, but this one had something that instantly raised my blood pressure. The second variation of the set was a piece of music which I have known all my life as an original *Étude de Campanelas* by Francisco Tárrega.

Aha, I said to myself, a clear case of plagiarism. How dare this Frenchman steal a piece of music from the Great Tárrega? Or was it the other way around?

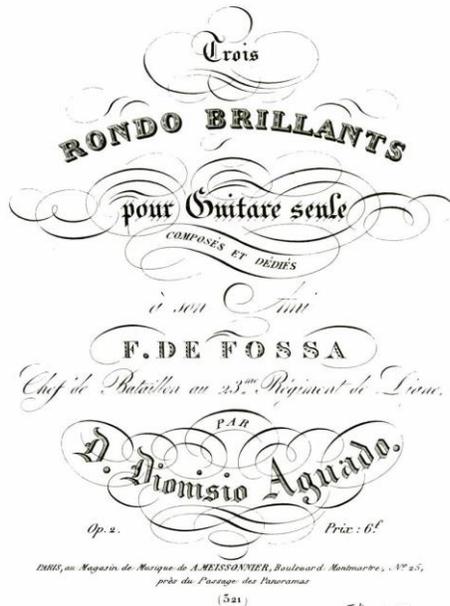
I knew that Francisco Tárrega was born in 1852 and died in 1909. The first step was to find out when this de Fossa lived. Looking in the usual musical dictionaries and encyclopedias was not helpful. The general ones did not mention him at all, and those devoted to the guitar had short inconclusive entries which simply referred to him as a guitar amateur at the early nineteenth century. While looking for this information, I also began searching for more music by de Fossa, and in a short time compiled a considerable collection of pieces from various libraries. Examining this rich resource, I soon realized that this unknown composer was in fact a major force for his time, a force that must be revived and brought to light.

De Fossa's taste in musical composition, judging from his known works, was directed towards chamber music with other guitars, and with string instruments and piano.

His original compositions show a refreshing degree of musical sophistication. His was not a mere repetition of formulas, but an attempt to create original music in tune with its time. De Fossa's compositions demonstrate an unusual richness of melodic materials and amusing surprises dispersed throughout. Syncopated rhythms often bound together with dissonant pedals, unexpected dynamics, harmonic sleight-of-hand, unusual and frequent modulations and rich dialogue-type texture, all contribute to create a vibrant and intense music. The composer knew the guitar well; the writing is technically idiomatic and exploits a wide variety of instrumental resources. Certainly, his works exhibit a tasteful treatment of classical patterns and a high level of compositional technique. One of the compositions by de Fossa that I found then was his variations on *La Tirolienne*, his Op. 1.

On the title page of that work, the composer is described as a

Chef de bataillon au service de S.M. le Roi de France.



Discussing my problems with a friend, I was told that there is one composition by the Spanish guitarist Dionisio Aguado, his *Trois Rondeaux Brillants Op. 2*,

which is dedicated to “Mon ami François de Fossa”,

Chef de Bataillon au 23^{me} Régiment de Ligne.

A similar description of the military connection as in the title page of the *Follies d'Espagne* piece. So, if de Fossa and Aguado were friends, obviously they were also of the same generation. I knew that Aguado died in 1849, which means that without question the little *Campanella* etude was not stolen by de Fossa from Tárrega, but exactly the other way around. So, who was this man?

NOMS DES COLONELS DU RÉGIMENT.		OFFICIERS, SOUS-OFFICIERS ET SOLDATS.	
Depuis sa création jusqu'à nos jours.		DU 23 ^e Régiment d'Infanterie de ligne.	
		Cités comme s'étant particulièrement distingués depuis la création de ce régiment.	
Duc d'Angoumois.....	de 1656 à 1679	<p>Au siège de Limbourg, le 18 juin 1675, Royal montait à la brèche. Le premier qui atteignit le sommet fut un sergent du régiment; mais à l'instant même où il y mettait le pied, les assiégés ayant fait un dernier effort, Royal fut repoussé une troisième fois, et le sergent resta seul. Au lieu de se retirer, il se cramponna d'une main à la muraille, et de l'autre agita sa hallebarde, en faisant signe à ses compagnons de revenir; en ce moment, une balle lui cassa le bras droit qui tenait la hallebarde; il prit aussitôt son chapeau de l'autre main, en appelant toujours à lui le régiment, qui venait de se reformer. Une seconde balle lui cassa le bras</p>	
Marquis de Perreuil.....	de 1729 à 1850		
Marquis de Cerey.....	de 1680 à 1693		
Marquis de Calvo.....	de 1693 à 1703		
Baron d'Ennerville.....	de 1703 à 1705		
Comte d'Anbogne.....	de 1705 à 1719		
Marquis de Cressy.....	de 1719 à 1740		
Marquis de Courtevaux.....	de 1740 à 1745		
Marquis de Puignier.....	de 1745 à 1759		
Marquis Duillet.....	de 1759 à 1768		
Comte de Mailly, marquis de Nesle.....	de 1768 à 1784		
Marquis de Brethillier.....	de 1784 à 1789		
Comte de Gaad.....	de 1789 à 1791		
De Castellane.....	de 1791 à 1792		
Graugier de la Forrière.....	de 1792 à 1794		
Gerard.....	de 1794 à 1796		
Duhalès.....	de 1796 à 1801		
Duroc.....	de 1801 à 1806		
Misale.....	de 1806 à 1811		
Laton.....	de 1811 à 1815		
Le baron Varrier.....	de 1815 à 1815		
Le comte de Labasse.....	de 1815 à 1821		
Le comte de Labasse.....	de 1821 à 1825		
Le comte de Montboissier.....	de 1825 à 1831		
Hannon.....	de 1831 à 1835		
Gueswiller.....	de 1835 à 1840		
De Racors.....	de 1840 à		

To find out the answer to this question, I went to Washington and spent five months working in the Library of Congress, examining the more than 5000 books on the history of the French Army in that enormous library. I even found a history of the 23rd *régiment de ligne*, but the only relevant piece of information I could glean from it was that in 1823 the regiment was commanded by the Comte de Montboissier, a name I now knew, because de Fossa's three quartets op. 19 were dedicated to him. Not a word about de Fossa himself.

I was about to give up and go home, when it suddenly occurred to me that I was looking in the wrong

direction. Yes, my man was a military officer, but with the prefix “de” to his name, he could also belong to a noble family. So, I looked in several dictionaries of French nobility, and soon enough found a book called *Dictionnaire des Familles Françaises*, where I found listings for two separate families with the name de Fossa. One was a line of descendants of the Huguenots and was based in Poitiers, and the other one was in Perpignan. The head of *that* family was a law professor at the University of Perpignan named François de Fossa who died in 1789. Some years before he died, he was ennobled by Louis XVI. Certainly this man could not have been the same person to whom Aguado dedicated his music.

Now I had a choice. I could go North to Poitiers, or South to Perpignan. But because I am a guitarist, I knew that most everything of value in the history of the guitar and in its repertoire, was created by Catalan guitarists, from Fernando Sor, to Miguel Llobet to Emilio Pujol. I decided to try Perpignan first.

My first stop was the 12th floor of the Library of Congress, where they keep the telephone directories from all cities all over the world. We are still in 1979, and the Internet does not exist yet. I found the address of the Archives Départementales des Pyrénées Orientales in Perpignan, and I wrote them a letter.

I asked them this: Here is what I know: a military person who is also a musician, and a professor of law at the university, both named François de Fossa. What can you tell me about them, and if there is any familial relationship between the two?

Within two weeks I got from them a large package with a complete inventory of the Fond de Fossa in their archives, and the response that indeed these two people were related. They were father and son.

I was there in Perpignan in 48 hours.

I spent an exciting week working in the archives, slowly building a complete picture of the biography of this amazing man. Just reading the 300 letters that he wrote to his sister Thérèse Campagne during 27 years, beginning with his exile to Spain and Mexico, gave me a deep apprehension of the character and personality of this gentleman.

François de Fossa was born in Perpignan on August 31st, 1775. His father, also named François de Fossa, was one of the most important historians of the Roussillon. He was a distinguished jurist, head of the faculty of law at the University of Perpignan and a prolific writer.

Not much is known about the education of young François. But having been absorbed with the erudition and learning which must have permeated the household in which he grew up, one can only infer that he must have been exposed to musical culture in his youth.

Shortly after the outbreak of the French Revolution de Fossa immigrated to Spain where he joined the Spanish army as a Volunteer in a company of French army officers and Gentlemen of the Nobility, called the Legion of the Pyrénées. He served there from the creation of the battalion in 1793 and participated in many of its campaigns. In 1796 he was summoned by Miguel d'Azanza, at the time the Spanish war minister, to serve directly under him. In 1789 d'Azanza was named by Carlos IV as Viceroy of Mexico and took de Fossa with him there. After spending some time in Mexico City and Puebla, de Fossa joined the infantry company in Acapulco as a "Cadete Gentilhombre." In 1800 he was promoted to second-lieutenant. He returned to Spain on orders of the King in 1803. After several military appointments and promotions, he was assigned to the Ministry of the Indies as a Bureau Chief. Eventually, he rejoined his regiment at the rank of Captain. In the battle of Granada, January 29th, 1810, he was taken a prisoner by the French, brought to Madrid where he was paroled by Joseph Bonaparte and assigned by him to his old post at the Ministry of the Indies. On the fall of Bonaparte in 1813, he fled to France with the French army which he then joined as a Captain. De Fossa returned to Spain, this time on the French side taking part in the campaign of the Duc d'Angoulême in Catalonia in 1823. At the end of this campaign, he was promoted to the rank of Chef de Battalion, and in 1825 he was made Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. Later he participated in the war against Algeria. He retired from military service in 1844. François de Fossa died in Paris on June 3rd, 1849.

It seems that de Fossa started to compose for the guitar already in 1808. In a letter which he wrote from Madrid to his sister in Perpignan in that year he relates of his attempts to supplement his meager government salary with composing music for the guitar. He even reports that some of his quartets were performed publicly and that he was called by his admirers *Haydn of the Guitar*.

But Madrid of 1808 was not a good place to build a musical career and he soon realized that he should seek his fortunes in other professions. De Fossa indeed never made music a full-time career. That did not stop him from composing, and when the time came, from publishing in France and in Germany a considerable number of musical works.

In conversation with the archivist in Perpignan, I asked him from where they have all this material. They received it some 20 years before from an old lady in Marseille who was a direct descendant of the family. They even had an address and a phone number, but were not sure if the lady was still alive.

I called.

“Madame de Fossa?”

“Oui.”

That response gave me a shudder and goose bumps, and for a few seconds I was speechless. It was, for me, like calling Madame Mozart, and getting the same response. I got hold of myself and explained to the lady that I was an American musicologist studying the history of the composer François de Fossa who must have been her great-grand father, and I would very much appreciate a chance to meet with her and ask her a few questions. She instantly responded that I was wasting my time, and hers, since there were never any musicians in her family, only military people. But I insisted and asked her to please accord me at least five minutes. She finally agreed, but warned me that tomorrow she will be quite busy, because there is a serious trouble with the plumbing in the bath room, and the landlord is refusing to repair it, and her son is going to come and deal with the recalcitrant landlord.

I wasn't quite sure what sort of trouble I was getting myself into. I was quite worried about this, but as a historian, the chance to meet a real direct descendant of an early nineteenth century composer, was so powerful a stimulant, that I threw all caution to the winds and took the train to Marseille.



The following day, at 10 o'clock sharp, I presented myself at her door and rang the bell. The door opened, and something incredible happened. One moment I was standing in twentieth century hustle and bustle of modern Marseille, and as soon as I stepped through the door, I was transported, as if in a time machine, back to the nineteenth century. And immediately realized how wrong I was in imagining her to myself the day before. Odette de Fossa-d'Ornano was a ninety-six-year-old woman at that time, a small woman but with a clear gaze and sharp demeanor, the very image of nobility.



Graciously she allowed me to look at the myriad pictures and portraits hanging all over the apartment, while continuing to warn me that any moment now her son will come to settle the problem with the landlord. The son, as it turned out, was one of the leading lawyers in France, known as Maître Roland d'Ornano.

One of the pictures on the wall attracted my attention. It was a small oval cameo showing a young man in military uniform.

She did not know who this man was, and perhaps it is her own father, who was also a military man. I knew this could not be, because her father would be in the military during the early twentieth century, and the little I knew about military uniform, suggested that this was an officer in a much earlier period.

I asked her permission to photograph the cameo and she allowed me to do so. I then took my leave, not wishing to impose further.

Coming back home, I developed the picture and started studying it.



I looked in libraries for information on French military uniform, and indeed the uniform was that of a chef de battalion.



I then identified the three medals on the officer chest and they indeed corresponded to the medals François de Fossa received as was listed in his military documents that were also part of the Perpignan archives, the order of St. Louis, the order of San Fernando and the Légion d'Honneur. But it could be anybody, not necessarily my composer.



Luckily, I was able to present the picture to Vladimir Tarasiuk in New York, a person who was all his life the curator of military uniforms at the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. He looked at the picture and pronounced:

This is a chef de battalion of the French Army, between 1815-1825, belonging to the 23rd régiment de ligne.

I knew that François de Fossa belonged to the 23rd regiment, but how did, he, Vladimir Tarasiuk, know that? Simple, he said. The number of the regiment is always inscribed of the buttons of the tunic.



That was the final proof that indeed this was a portrait of our composer. Several years later, I met Maître Roland d'Ornano, the son of Odette de Fossa, in Marseille, and he graciously gave me the second portrait of the composer, a picture that is now known all over the world, and I must say, the only portrait of an early nineteenth century guitarist/composer in color.

Incidentally, I never went to Poitiers.