

# Learning a New Piece

by Harry George Pellegrin

Students as well as professionals all face a common event on a regular basis—the inevitable new piece. This is the piece of music that the guitarist has never played and possibly may never have even heard beforehand. There it sits, a white sheet of foolscap covered by lots of dots; that is what most players see. What they don't see is the harmonic structure or familiar scale patterns and chord shapes. New students will begin to make sound (note: I didn't say *play*) without even checking the key or time signatures! The more experienced student will check this data and if he is truly astute, may even ascertain whether the piece is in the major or relative minor variant of the key. My students also scan the music to make a mental note of pitch range. (Does the piece cover the instrument's range or does it contain itself to a specific area of the fingerboard?) They also analyze how the piece is structured. Is the piece and A/B form? A/B/A? Are there any modulations or mutations? Where is the melody? Is it carried upon the higher pitched strings or does it run on a bass string – such as the melodic line in the Villa Lobos Prelude Number One? Does it hug the first string – like in the theme of the Sor Magic Flute Variations? My best students look at the music longer than the rest – they find similar chord patterns, scales, etc. These students spend the most time just looking at the music but also produce the best initial read-throughs! Preparation is everything. So there are many avenues one must explore as one approaches that new piece of music as it stares back from the music stand.

I have been working with two of my students using the Sor Etudes as compiled by Andrés Segovia. They are both working on Etude Five (which is Opus 35 Number 22.) This piece is remarkable on a number of levels. First it has a depth of emotional content that belies its humble 'Etude' aspirations—it is a lovely piece. Second, the left hand remains fairly static throughout the piece. If you've played the piece, you will remember that the basic harmonic structure hovers between the tonic and dominant harmonies for most of the piece with a brief sojourn into the subdominant tonality (including one of my favorite preparations of a C major chord in first inversion in the repertoire) and then Sor throws those last two lines at the student...always the student's least favorite part of the piece.

Here is the A section of Sor's Etude Opus 35, Number 22.

The image shows the musical score for the A section of Sor's Etude Opus 35, Number 22. The score is written for guitar in treble clef, with a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a 3/4 time signature. The piece is marked 'C II' and begins with a dynamic of *p* (piano). The notation includes various fingerings (e.g., 1, 3, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4) and accents (e.g., *a*, *a*). The score consists of four staves of music, with the final measure ending with a double bar line and a fermata.

What would one of my students say about this selection? First they would tell you it is a triple meter piece (3/4 time) and it is in the key of B minor. Why B minor? Why not D major? The key would be correctly determined because they would look at the first and last measures and note the B minor chord outlined therein. This would be coupled with the A#'s in the piece (the harmonic minor leading tone that produces an F# dominant (or dominant7) chord. Then the student would look at the piece and find the melody line. This is always more difficult when a piece or selection thereof is built on arpeggios. Segovia was kind enough to edit the piece with upward stems on the melody notes and one should 'bring these notes up' when playing the piece. Apoyando works nice, but I am getting ahead of myself.

Let's look at the first two measures:

The image shows the first two measures of the piece in 3/4 time, key of B minor. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff with upward stems. The first measure contains a B minor chord (B2, D3, F#3) and the second measure contains a B minor chord (B2, D3, F#3). The guitar chord diagram shows a B minor chord in the second position (C II) with fingerings: 1 on the 2nd fret of the 4th string, 3 on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string, and 4 on the 2nd fret of the 2nd string. A photograph shows a hand playing the guitar in the second position.

The left hand need only find the b minor chord shown at right to produce every note (and hold them for the correct duration) in the first two measures of the Etude. Six beats down, zero left hand motion. Then we move.

Measure Three:

When transitioning to measure three (the first change of hand-shape) the third finger remains in position on the F# on the fourth (D) string. The third finger will be used as a 'planting' finger – a finger upon which all changes are rooted – in much of the piece.

In the accompanying photograph, you will note my second finger is fretting the A# on the third (G) string. I do this merely because

The image shows the notation for measure three, which is a B minor chord (B2, D3, F#3). The guitar chord diagram shows a B minor chord in the second position with fingerings: 1 on the 2nd fret of the 4th string, 3 on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string, and 4 on the 2nd fret of the 2nd string. A photograph shows a hand playing the guitar in the second position.

this is a chord shape that will be used later in the piece and I find it easier in my own playing to keep my hand/chord shapes consistent when possible. The student need not follow my example; however, the planting of the third finger is critical. So finger 3 stays down when transitioning to measure four.

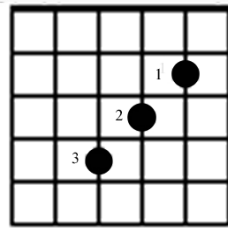
Measure Four:

The image shows the notation for measure four, which is a B minor chord (B2, D3, F#3). The guitar chord diagram shows a B minor chord in the second position with fingerings: 1 on the 2nd fret of the 4th string, 3 on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string, and 4 on the 2nd fret of the 2nd string. A photograph shows a hand playing the guitar in the second position.

Measure four returns to the tonic chord, but not the Grand Barré form found in measures one and two. In the photograph, I have extended my first finger to

allow the reader to more clearly see the other fingers. I do not recommend holding the left hand like this in performance.

Measure Five returns to the dominant of the key of b minor (an F# major triad.) and is fingered thusly:

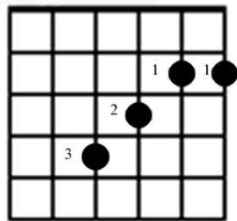


Please see photograph for measure three for an example of how this looks in execution. As one can readily see, not much has really happened harmonically—just the very definitive assertion of the b minor tonality through the use of the tonic/dominant relationship.

Measures Six, Seven and Eight commence by presenting the resolution of the dominant chord in arpeggiated in measure five with (naturally) a tonic b minor, only to quickly return via a passing chord and a passing tone to the dominant to end the first phrase of the A section:



Measure Eight is shown in the accompanying diagram and photograph:



The half barré is a personality quirk of mine. This chord could be played much the same as a three-fingered open-position F major chord that all students learn early on. As I have written previously, I try to use identical hand shapes for similar chords to keep the changes easy to remember. The end of this phrase, as stated previously lands upon the

dominant tonality of F# major. Sor begins the second phrase of the A section with a very familiar melodic/harmonic motif in measure nine:



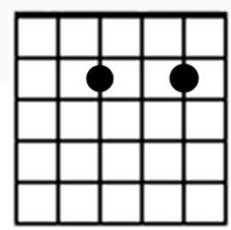
Measure nine utilizes the same b minor chord hand shape as seen in measures one and two. Measure ten incorporates a new wrinkle on the old

formula by including the F# on the second fret of the first string which is fretted with the first finger but omitting the B note played on the fifth string (and held as a tied note in measure two.) One can use the same barré chord as used in measure ten as was used in measure nine—in fact one should. Measure eleven is identical to measure three and needs no further illumination.

Measure Twelve: Departs from what we have become familiar with in the first phrase. Rather than following the tonic/dominant chord change with a tonic chord, Sor moves us to a G major chord



(the VI chord of b minor) which leads to a C# diminished



chord in measure thirteen (one that is often read as an A7 chord—an honest, though erroneous, interpretation based on the chord shape produced by the edition fingering.) The C# diminished resolves to a tonic chord in measure fourteen identical in construct and fingering to measure four. Measure fourteen moves to the identical dominant in measure fifteen as is present in measure five. Measure sixteen is a new form of that same chord found in measure one (and elsewhere) and an identical fingering produces all the pitches required to correctly complete the measure. At this point we can stand back and say that the A section of the piece is comprised of two phrases, each eight measures in length. Phrase one leads us from tonic to dominant (having once established the tonal center) and phrase two leads us back to the tonic.