



# The Soldier's Return

Guitar works inspired by Scotland



James Akers  
romantic guitar

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James Akers *romantic guitar*

About James Akers:

*'A superb player'*  
The Independent

*'Wonderfully supple, propulsive and alive'*  
The Guardian

*I'd like to dedicate this recording to the memory of my sister Lorraine Galloway*

Fernando Sor (1778-1839)	
1. <b>Variations on a Favourite Scottish Air</b> , Op. 40	[7:07]
Mauro Giuliani (1781-1829)	
2. <b>The Soldier's Return</b>	[4:25]
Luigi Legnani (1790-1877)	
3. <b>Variations on Rossini's 'La Marcia'</b> (from <i>La donna del Lago</i> )	[7:31]
Mauro Giuliani	
4. <b>Prelude and Scotsoises (1)</b>	[4:05]
5. <b>Blue Bells of Scotland</b>	[4:49]
6. <b>Jenny's Bawbee, A Reel</b>	[4:09]
Johann Kaspar Mertz (1806-1856)	
7. <b>Fingal's Cave</b>	[4:40]
Mauro Giuliani	
8. <b>Coming through the Rye</b>	[3:45]
9. <b>Prelude and Scotsoises (2)</b>	[4:25]
10. <b>This is no my ain Lassie</b>	[5:05]
Luigi Legnani	
11. <b>Variations on Rossini's 'Oh Quante Lagrime'</b> (from <i>La donna del Lago</i> )	[7:47]
Mauro Giuliani	
12. <b>The Old Country Bumpkin</b>	[3:03]
Total playing time	[61:00]



### The Soldier's Return: Guitar works inspired by Scotland

In the early-nineteenth century, a wave of enthusiasm for Scottish literature, landscape and music swept across Europe. Artists of the time turned away from the rational egalitarianism of the Enlightenment towards the darker rough-hewn individualism of the Romantics. This trend found inspiration in the remote and austere landscapes of the Scottish Highlands, in atmospheric folk tales revitalised by Sir Walter Scott in his novels and in the mellifluous songs and rhyme of the farmer poet Robert Burns. Those islands on the edge of the Atlantic must have seemed as remote and exotic as the far-east to the creative figures revolutionising human expression in central and southern Europe, their distant wildness a fitting metaphor for the exploration of the depths of the human psyche being undertaken in art.

Some ventured to explore the geography of Scotland. In 1829 the young Felix Mendelssohn visited Edinburgh and was inspired to write a *Scottish Symphony* and his famous *Hebrides Overture*, also known as *Die Fingalshöhle* or Fingal's cave, after a sea cave on the uninhabited island of Staffa. Sir Walter Scott, the pre-eminent word-smith of his day found it beyond his

craft to describe this place, writing of it, 'one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld. It exceeded, in my mind, every description I had heard of it [...] composed entirely of basaltic pillars as high as the roof of a cathedral, and running deep into the rock, eternally swept by a deep and swelling sea, and paved, as it were, with ruddy marble, [it] baffles all description.'

'Where words fail, music speaks' (Hans Christian Andersen). Thus composers were obliged to portray this landscape in sound. One of these was Johann Kaspar Mertz (1806-1856). A true romantic, Mertz suffered from ill health, in the form of neuralgia, was a virtuoso guitarist and his most significant work is called *Bardenklänge* or 'Bardic Sounds.' Mertz's music was influenced by the intense piano works of Schumann and Chopin and extended the emotional range of the guitar beyond its classical foundations. His *Fingalshöhle* is based on a simple rising melody with a resonant arpeggiated accompaniment that builds to a crashing dark climax reminiscent of the stark surroundings of the Hebridean shore.

Mauro Giuliani (1781-1829) would appear to be of a somewhat lighter character. Born in southern Italy, in 1806 he left his impoverished homeland to seek his fortune in the cultural capital of Europe, Vienna.

Vienna was already home to Europe's greatest living composer, Beethoven, a true deity of Romanticism and a thriving music scene. Here, within a short time, Giuliani's concerts instigated a passion for the guitar among the Viennese professional classes that kept him busy performing, teaching and composing for much of his adult life.

Giuliani's style is simpler than that of Mertz. With the melodic grace, tonal harmonies and march rhythms of Italian opera, Giuliani's ambition was not towards the avant-garde. He was a prolific composer of works, ranging from grand concertos to simple studies but, except in guitar technique, he wasn't an innovator. However, his music has much to offer in performance. Well written pieces that explore the range of dynamics and timbre of the guitar, moments of great tenderness juxtaposed with virtuoso flash. This music requires a performance and an audience to come alive but then communicates great joy.

Amongst Giuliani's many pieces for solo guitar, posthumously published so lacking an opus number, were his *Sei Arie Nazionali Scozzesi*. It is in pieces such as these that Giuliani demonstrates the true depth of his skill. While often maligned as a composer

of charming trifles, even by those with reason to champion his work, here he shows extraordinary craftsmanship in adapting the modal idiom of the Scottish folk tunes into the sophisticated musical language of the first Viennese school. Giuliani's settings of these six tunes, including Hogmanay favourites such as *The Bluebells of Scotland* and *Coming through the Rye*, manage to fuse the disparate elements into a unified whole. The results are charming, enlivening and, at times, deeply moving.

Much of Giuliani's music has remained continuously in print since the early-nineteenth century, largely due to its didactic usefulness. He produced vast swathes of simple pieces for the delight of student and amateur guitarists. These include his sets of *Eccosais* or *Scotsoises*, short charming melodies in a folk style. Rather than present these tiny pieces individually, I have combined six pieces into two sets of dances, employing one in each set as a recurring rondo theme, and prefixed them with an appropriate prelude. The intention being to give these melodies the opportunity to linger a little longer than they might do otherwise and allow some space to vary the interpretation and add some ornaments.

The breadth of influence that Scottish culture had on European composers is best

exemplified by the works of Sir Walter Scott. In literature, only Shakespeare has inspired more opera plots, with over ninety being based on Scott's work. The first of these was Rossini's *La donna del lago*. Scott's narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* was hugely successful and influential in its day. It inspired a revival of interest in the clan culture of the Scottish Highlands, provided the original text of Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria* and gave Gioachino Rossini's librettist, Andrea Leone Tottola, the plot of an opera.

Italian opera was the popular music of its day. There was a substantial market for favourite melodies from operas arranged in formats that could be played in the home on popular parlour instruments like the piano or guitar. No composer for guitar was better qualified for this task than Luigi Legnani (1790-1877).

Legnani was trained as a violinist before turning his attention to singing and guitar playing. He was a regular performer on the Ravenna opera stage for seventeen years and was steeped in the world of opera. When he began pursuing a career as a virtuoso guitarist, the obvious source material for his compositions in variation form was the opera melodies he has performed and heard as a singer. On

this recording are two sets of variations on themes from Rossini's *La donna del lago*. One is based on a simple march, the other on a virtuosic soprano aria, the cavatina, *Oh Quante Lagrime*. Both have very similar structures, but express the possibilities of their source material differently, in sympathy with the nature of the originals. Rossini's *Oh Quante Lagrime* is an extrovert vehicle for vocal display. Legnani's variations are equally demanding of the guitarist. The melody is set in various registers from alto to treble to bass. Accompanied by a transparent bass texture or full chords, broken into wide leaping octaves or floating flute-like in the upper reaches of the fretboard, Legnani extracts multiple possibilities from the original and wrests from it a broad range of emotions while never losing touch with its operatic foundations.

The simplicity of the march allows Legnani to display his gift for melody and harmonic invention. The highlight being a character variation, where Legnani departs from the three-part structure of the theme to introduce a meditation on the intimate possibilities of the guitar. Like a soliloquy in a play, the composer, through the guitar, communicating directly to the audience without the veil of bravura display.

Fernando Sor had a truly cosmopolitan life. Born in Catalonia he left Spain, for political reasons, having achieved considerable success as a ballet composer. He lived at various times in London, Paris and as far afield as Moscow. Sor has been credited as being one of the most important composers for guitar but this doesn't do justice to the broad range of his compositional output. Songs, opera, ballets, concertos, Sor was much more than a gifted dilettante composer of guitar music. The guitar, however, was the consistent feature in his musical life and it is for guitar he produced his most personal works.

Sor's *Variations on a Favourite Scottish Air*, Op. 40 had remained unpublished in the modern era until revived by Brian Jeffery. They begin with a freely composed fantasia before Sor sets the wistful tune, adapted by Robert Burns for his song *Ye Banks and Braes of Bonnie Doon*, for the guitar. The three subsequent variations follow the form of the song and stay close to the melody before a coda, notable for Sor's plaintive use of harmonics, brings the piece to a close.

On this recording I used three different guitars. For the Sor, Mertz and Legnani pieces, a Panormo copy made by James

Cole in 2015, for most of the Giuliani pieces an original guitar from around 1820 possibly by Saumier and for the remainder a copy of a Terz guitar (a smaller instrument tuned to a higher pitch) in the Edinburgh University instrument collection by James Marriage (2013).

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## James Akers

James Akers was born in Scotland and began playing guitar at the age of ten, later studying with Robert Mackillop at Napier University, Edinburgh. Whilst at Napier he turned his attentions to playing the lute, progressing to the Royal College of Music and study with Jakob Lindberg. Adding theorbo to his expanding instrument collection, James continued his studies at Trinity College of Music with Jacob Heringman and David Miller with additional lessons and advice from Paul O'Dette and Elizabeth Kenny. Having settled on the period instrument path James continued accumulating instruments and exploring the music of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Following a Junior Fellowship at Trinity College of Music James began pursuing a varied professional career. As a soloist he has performed mostly in the UK and Scandinavia giving recitals for The Yorke Music Trust, Ullapool Guitar Festival, Classical Guitar Retreat, Exeter Guitar Festival and the Copenhagen Renaissance Music Festival.

He has accompanied leading singers including Dame Emma Kirkby, James Bowman, Michael Chance, Miriam Allan, and Sam Bowden and with ensembles such as I Fagiolini, Ex Cathedra, Fretwork, The Parley of Instruments, The

Hanover Band, Sounds Baroque and the Dunedin Consort.

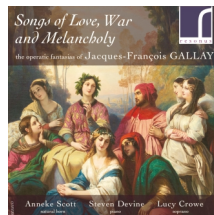
As a continuo player James has worked for major opera companies, English National Opera, Welsh National Opera, Opera North and Innsbruck Festival Opera and orchestras and chamber groups including The Scottish, Irish and English Chamber Orchestras, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, The Scottish Ensemble, and ventured into other styles with Damon Albarn.

James has performed on numerous recordings – his debut solo recording *Thesaurus Harmonicus* was released in 2012; a few film soundtracks; several theatrical stages, including Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and the Barbican, and broadcast for the BBC, France Musique and RTE Lyric, Ireland.

Although mostly concentrating on performing and teaching, James has occasionally indulged in research, exploring the domestic music making of Samuel Pepys and his 'musical secretary' Cesare Morelli, the polyphony of Scottish Renaissance composer David Peebles and, most recently, how Scottish melodies were used by European guitarist composers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. James is a lecturer in early plucked strings at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

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RESONUS LIMITED – UK

[info@resonusclassics.com](mailto:info@resonusclassics.com)

[www.resonusclassics.com](http://www.resonusclassics.com)

