

**Five perspectives on Teaching the Use of Rubato in the Interpretation of the Organ Music
of the Late Romantic Composer Cesar Franck**

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I knew the Chorale in A Minor by Cesar Franck, and had played it for several years. But when I played it for a master teacher, I suddenly entered a new world, an exhilarating and exciting world. The difference was a new application of *rubato*. I remember vividly the visceral and emotional high I experienced that day: I became part of the music and was swept along with it. I felt compelled to search for ways to re-create the experience, not only with that piece but with all of my music. My practice became different as I sought for the essence of the music.

Asked the meaning of the word *rubato*, most non-musicians draw a blank. When musicians are asked the meaning of *rubato*, the answers are somewhat vague, e.g. *stolen time*, *unmeasured time*, *rhythmic freedom*, all valid concepts, but ambiguous. Yet research demonstrates that a performance without *rubato* yields the general perception of a lack of musicianship. (Johnson, 2003) The actual use of *rubato* varies widely, even in the same piece, from performer to performer. As I have also found, teachers vary widely in their communication of the concept of *rubato* to their students. This seems so even within the same style of music and the same composer's music.

I have studied the organ works of Cesar Franck with many different teachers, dating back to my undergraduate days. Each teacher, of course, had an individual way of demonstrating interpretation, but, on the subject of *rubato*, there was a certain vagueness. This was probably deliberate, in order to introduce the student to a concept without dictating exactly its execution. This therefore left the final result to the nascent musicianship of the student.

Most teachers I have had made use of "dashes" of varying lengths, indicating the lengthening of those notes. Not until I studied in Paris one summer did I come across a teacher who blew away

any ideas I previously had about the use of rubato in the music of Franck. This was Mme. Bernadette Dufourcet-Hakim, organist of Notre Dame des Champs. I did all of the playing, with her talking me through Franck's Chorale No. 3 in A Minor. In one place I was told to delay playing a note after a rest as long as I could. I was urged on by the description of one section as "stormy." By the time I finished the lesson, the piece I had known for so long became a totally different one, and I a different person. I would like to study the way teachers employ rubato as a part of interpretation.

Chris Johnson has done a series of studies into the nature and importance of rubato to a musical performance. In one study (Johnson, 2003), using a performance of a violoncello solo from J. S. Bach's Suite Number 3, Bourree Number 1, by Janos Starker which was fed into a computer program, he created six models. The models had varying degrees of rubato, ranging from none, to an exaggerated level. One model was created from desirable timings found in another study. That particular model was judged to be most musical, but the models with slightly more and slightly less rubato were judged almost statistically the same. The model with no rubato and the one with the most exaggerated level of rubato were judged least musical, with the exaggerated model coming in last. The study seemed to show that, while flow was important to the musicality, that a large amount of rubato could be absorbed into the piece before it foundered. It also demonstrated that a performance without rubato, or with very little rubato, is not perceived as musical.

In another of Johnson's studies, participants were partly graduate level music students, and partly non-music students who were in a music class for undergraduate level students majoring in elementary school teaching. They were asked to evaluate four recordings of a Mozart horn concerto for musicianship. The recordings had been chosen from a group of fifteen recordings. The four

chosen were considered the two best and the two worst in overall musicianship. Participants assessed soloists with regard to musicianship, expression, tone quality, tempo, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of each soloist's use of rubato. Most participants agreed in all areas except that of rubato. The graduate level musicians predictably chose the two best, but the other participants actually chose the two worst. The study suggests that rubato is an extremely subtle musical nuance. This particular study might seem to contradict the importance of my study, in that only the finest musicians can detect its presence. But I see it another way. Those undergraduates were about to enter the classroom. In many ways they are a microcosm of a large segment of the population. Is it not important for us to in some way inspire them to be able to both create and to detect in a fine performance a phenomenon which we know injects excitement into music? (Johnson, 1998)

In another of his studies into rubato, Johnson took fifteen different performances of Bach's Suite No. 3 for Violoncello solo, Bourree, and arithmetically averaged them into a single quantitatively "average performance." It was found, however, that by doing this, all unique timing elements were lost, and the effect was that there actually seemed to be less rubato than any of the individual performances. Yet previous research suggested that *more* rubato creates a more musical performance. One of the conclusions for the resulting incongruity is that there is a temporal musical flow that conforms to musical common practice. The flow forms an outline of a quickening and slowing of the musical line, but not by exact times. So we lost the unique timings, but we were left with this flowing line. (Johnson, 1999)

Chris Johnson suggests that rubato might be the most overlooked element in applied instruction. Teachers emphasize dynamics and phrasing, whereas dynamics are usually outlined on the printed music. Pitch and rhythm errors are clearly detected and receive overwhelming attention

even though extensive research has shown that none of these elements are easily discernible. But, he says, we rarely examine the aspects of temporal planning. We usually revert to instructing our students to “feel” the music, and move the lines as they feel. He suggests that the old-fashioned method of instructing a student to “make this longer” and “this longer still” and “slow down here” might well be sufficient to create a temporally musical performance. (Johnson, 2003)

With these studies into the intangible of rubato, I think Chris Johnson has made an attempt to quantify the phenomenon of rubato and thereby to give us a clue as to how to begin to make it plain to our students. . However, he never touched upon style, performance practice, or interpretation using rubato. Rollin Smith has written a very practical book, Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of Cesar Franck (1983), in which he gives original source information on phrasing and fingering in Franck’s organ works. He even gives information gained from recordings of Franck’s works by Charles Tournemire, one of Franck’s pupils, about which notes to stretch in the sense of rubato. All of this is very helpful, but still is inadequate to one searching for an approach to the music which will reveal the nature and amount of rubato needed.

PURPOSE STATEMENT: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the teaching of rubato in lessons taught by five well-known teachers of organ performance. The study will be conducted at the organ lofts where each of the teachers work: three in the Northeast United States, and two in Paris, France. At this stage in research, rubato will be generally defined as an interpretive device which takes liberties with the rhythm and tempo of particular notes, phrases, or sections of pieces.

I want to gather information about the teaching process, particularly as it pertains to the use of rubato as a tool for interpretation. The study will focus on whether rubato is actually taught, or

is left to the student to discover. If it is taught, *how* is it taught? Does the teacher talk the student through it, or is it played by the teacher for the student to hear first? What effect does this have on the student and the student's playing of the piece? These are some of the questions I want to answer.

DELIMITATIONS:

I have decided to limit the study to the organ works of Cesar Franck (1822-1890). The choice of Franck is because every organist studies and plays his works. While he is not considered a major composer of works in any other medium, he is a major influence for organists. He was the undisputed master of organ composition and improvisation in the nineteenth century. Undergraduates study at least one of his works, and graduate students study several more. In fact, many organists include all of his works in their repertoire. Another reason for choosing Franck, is that there is so little indication in his works about how to play them. He gives directions for registrations (choice of stops on the organ), and even some fingering, but there is very little to guide the player in choosing tempo or placing rubato. Many of his markings are also inconsistent. At similar points in the music the markings are different, or missing, as if the player should already know what to do, or that the choice for what to do belongs to the player.

LIMITATION: I alone will act as the student for all of the teachers. For some, this may be considered a weakness of the study. The justification for this is that it limits the number of participants and therefore simplifies the process of gathering information. In order to ensure a thorough experience, I will audiotape and videotape the lessons. These will be not only for my own study, but also will provide material for transcription of important parts of the encounters between the teachers and me..

Because I will be the only student, I will do self-inquiry at each stage of the research. After

each lesson, I will write about my goals for the lesson, whether or not I felt I actually did accomplish the goal(s), and how I felt about the experience itself. Was it a positive experience, or negative one? Was the feeling one of exhilaration or of failure, of hope or confusion? Was I inspired to relearn my music with a new perspective on how to use rubato, or was I ready to give up the quest?

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

Rubato: *Grove Music Online* defines rubato as the expressive alteration of rhythm or tempo. The definition distinguishes between an earlier type, where the melody is altered while the accompaniment maintains strict time, and a later type involving *rhythmic flexibility of the entire musical substance*. (“Rubato,” *Grove Music Online*)

The earlier type of rubato applied to music of the early eighteenth century through the period of, roughly, Chopin, or the early part of the nineteenth century. In 1752 Quantz used the expression *tempo rubato*. W. A. Mozart explained that in keyboard rubato, “the left hand should go on playing in strict time.” Vocal rubato was described by many eighteenth century European writers and music theorists. The keyboard player was the one who held it all together with strict time. This kind of rubato did not apply to recitative, cadenza, or free forms such as the prelude, toccata or fantasia.

The later type of rubato was described in 1801 as “time alternately accelerated and retarded for the purpose of enforcing the expression.” (“Rubato”, *Grove Music Online*) Liszt is said to have used it, and Czerny complained in 1839 of its excessive use.

During the later Romantic period there was a gradual increase in the use of tempo fluctuation for subjective expressive purposes. Rhythm became the principal element in expressive performance, and many books on piano playing included lists of places to hasten or retard. The word rubato now often encompassed not only momentary and ‘capricious’ tempo changing on one or a few notes, but also the expressive

shaping of phrases, and sometimes even the ‘tempo modification of Wagner applied to entire movements. The word, occasionally in the form of *rubando*, appeared in the orchestral and vocal scores of composers such as Tchaikovsky, Mascagni and Puccini. (“Rubato,” *Grove Music Online*)

In playing the works of Cesar Franck, I have encountered mainly the earlier type of rubato, i.e. the stretched notes and phrases here and there. However, not until I studied with Mme. Bernadette Dufourcet-Hakim did I have so forceful a demonstration of the power of the later kind of rubato in the organ works of Franck.

Organ: When I speak of the organ, I mean the pipe organ, i.e. the musical instrument with one or more keyboards called manuals, and pedals played by the feet. The sound for the pipe organ comes from wind blowing through the pipes. Because each stop, or rank, of pipes is, in effect, a unique and individual musical instrument, the pipe organ, is often referred to as the “King of Instruments.” The modern pipe organ is powered by electricity, whereas before electricity was available, first there were men working at pumping stations, then there were even attempts at gasoline powered instruments. The motor pumps air into reservoirs, which then deliver air to the pipes for the stops drawn by the organist.

The organ is divided into divisions, each of which is a complete organ in and of itself. The divisions are the Pedal organ, the Great organ, the Choir or Positiv organ, the Swell or Recit organ, and for the larger instruments there are the Solo division, the Bombarde division, and Antiphonal divisions. Some of the divisions, e.g. the Swell and Choir, are enclosed in chambers with shutters which can be opened and closed to give the impression of a crescendo or diminuendo. In the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, more and more of the pipe organ divisions were enclosed, reflecting the desire for huge crescendos. (I played an organ built in the early twentieth

century in which the entire organ was enclosed.) In nineteenth century organs like those built by Cavaille-Coll, the Recit division was large and influential enough so that, when coupled to the Great organ, which is unenclosed, there still was a crescendo. This was even more effective when the Recit and the Positiv were both coupled to the Great.

In Franck's time the organ had begun to evolve from the smaller instrument with only a few pedals, to a full symphonic range of possibilities. The most famous organ builder of the period was Aristede Cavaille-Coll (1811-1899), who built the organ at St. Clothilde, Franck's church, and at many other large churches in Paris. The largest organ he built is still at St. Sulpice, and has the original console. Franck worked with Cavaille-Coll to design a unique instrument for St. Clothilde, one for which he wrote most of his organ works. The acoustics of St. Clothilde together with the beauty of the instrument combine to produce a legendary sound. Organists return to this church again and again to play the works of Franck on the organ for which he created them, and to hear how the stops he called for in his works really sound.

Registration: This is the term for the combination of stops chosen for a particular piece or a section of a piece. It is customary to abide by the composer's wishes if directions are given. However, because every organ is different, the organist is the final judge for what works best for this organ and this piece. Organists who return to St. Clothilde in Paris can enjoy playing Franck's works with the registration he used.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Participants: (Proposed)

William Enriken: Associate Professor of Organ and Piano, New York University. Dr. Enriken

is also Organist and Choirmaster at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, located on Broadway at the corner of 12th Street. Dr. Entriiken studied at the University of Indiana, Union Seminary School of Sacred Music (where we were classmates), and Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he earned his Doctor of Musical Arts in Organ Performance. In addition, to his American studies, Dr. Entriiken also studied in Germany for a time. I have been studying with him for about two years.

Joan Hult Lippincott: Ms. Lippincott is former Chair of the Organ Department at Westminster Choir College, where I studied with her when I was an undergraduate there. She is a graduate of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. She has become very well-known as a teacher and performer. She also leads groups to Europe to study and play music on organs for which it was originally intended.

Martin Jean: Professor of Organ, Yale University School of Sacred Music. Dr. Jean is a much respected teacher and performer. I have never studied with him but have heard very good reports from others who have done so.

Marie Louise Langlais: Teacher of organ at the Paris Conservatoire. The widow of organ composer Jean Langlais, she has made it her life's work to properly introduce students from all backgrounds to French music for organ. She teaches in the loft of St. Clothilde, where Cesar Franck, Charles Tournemire, and her husband, were the organists. I have studied with her there.

Bernadette Dufourcet-Hakim: An extremely well-known performer and composer, she is also the wife of Naji Hakim, the brilliant organist and composer. She presides over the Cavaille-Coll organ at Notre Dame des Champs in Paris. I studied with her once, when in Paris.

Student: I will be the student, and, in addition to taping and videotaping the lessons, I will also keep a journal about the impact of the encounters with the teachers. The audio and videotapes will

be for my own study, so that I may search for clues to answer the questions I have about this process of communication of the unwritten tradition of tempo rubato.

Procedures:

Each teacher will be interviewed before the lesson. Questions will be about the teacher's approach to Romantic literature, in general, approach to the music of Cesar Franck, and to the particular pieces being studied in the upcoming lesson. Questions will also cover whether or not rubato is taught or left to the student, and, if it is taught, how it is taught.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Judging from the great contrast in interpretation of Franck's organ music that I have encountered in my studies with many teachers over the years, I would say that there is not a clear shared idea about the use of rubato. As one teacher put it, we are "all over the place" where rubato in Franck's music is concerned. Certainly, each is entitled to interpret music as he/she sees fit, for the organ, the room, the occasion. But hearing the recording of Anthony Newman playing the Franck Chorale in A Minor on the organ at Holy Trinity Episcopal in New York, and then hearing it played by Madame Durufle in France, one becomes aware both of the possibilities and of the pitfalls should one become isolated from tradition and the wisdom of those closest to it. The results in both of those recordings scream for a common understanding. I hope to uncover and to discover some means for communicating with each other and with our students about that part of music which is not actually written out for us to decipher: rubato, or *tempo rubato*.

CESAR FRANCK:

Cesar Auguste Franck was born on December 10, 1822 in Liege, Belgium. His father, a bank clerk, having decided upon a virtuoso career in music for his son, enrolled Cesar in the Liege

Conservatoire before his eighth birthday. The family immigrated to Paris in 1836 and Cesar was admitted to the Conservatoire Nationale de Musique de Paris in October of 1837. At the age of fourteen, he was compared favorably with the best known keyboard virtuosi of the time.

That Franck was a fine pianist is attested to in writings of the period. It also can be seen in his organ music, in that the manual parts are pianistic and virtuosic, but at the same time contrapuntal in a manner very effective for organ. His training as an organist, like that of all organists of the period, was devoted mostly to improvisation. Rollin Smith writes

Indeed, the class served not to train virtuosi but as a workshop to develop skills in improvisation for those musicians who were already exceptional players. Most of the students were also competent composers. The value of improvisation to exercise and stimulate the creative musical mind has always been stressed in France.

(Smith, 1983)

There were also the extramusical considerations, such as the church's liturgical demands upon its organists, which necessitated the study of improvisation. In the service they were expected to connect parts of the service, which might be in different keys or modes, to the next part of the liturgy, with an improvisation. It was impossible to know ahead of time in what key these things were to be. The organist heard the key, the theme of one section, and invented a composition based upon that, very much like jazz musicians today. The function of the organist as improviser in the French liturgical service is so important that the titular organist does not even accompany the choir. There is a separate organ and choir organist who does all of the accompanying. The principal organist has only to do the Prelude, Sortie, or exit piece, and improvise at various places in the service. (Smith, 1983)

The emphasis on improvisation in France has produced prodigious improvisors who take submitted themes and build symphonies on organ, based upon those themes. Franck's

improvisations brought high praise from his hearers. He could improvise florid counterpoint, fugues, sonata form, and extended pieces, using the full resources of the organ. Time and again, we read of his inaugurating new organs by playing one of his own pieces, then doing an improvisation on themes by other composers. He also presented works of J. S. Bach, and was one of the first ones to do so in that generation in France, as the pedal organ (and organists who could play them) was only then becoming advanced enough to play Bach's pedal lines. (Smith, 1983)

Franck did not begin to concentrate on composition until he was in his fifties. Until then he concentrated on improvisation and interpretation, for which his training had prepared him. It seems to me that it is likely that many, if not all, of his compositions began life as improvisations. For this reason, the manuscript was merely the blueprint and, for him, did not need to contain details about interpretation, because it was played differently each time. There are those who wrote out their tempo rubato for future players (Chopin, Stravinsky), in an effort to communicate exactly their intent. Messiaen said often, e.g. that one should play his music *exactly as it was written*. One who was pronounced peerless in his pure musical invention, as Franck was, would be less inclined to place such restrictions upon those who would play his music. I think he trusted the musicality of those who would interpret him, dwelling, as he did, at the heart of musical invention in his improvisations. He, above all others, understood how the player must absorb and digest the music, only to turn out different versions of it each time it is performed. This is not to say that he would allow the notes to be changed or rewritten into a different piece, but that he fully understood how the performer's genius and sensitivity must be given the freedom to be swept away in the process of performing. This certainly would apply to tempo rubato. For those of us who could not hear him improvise or perform his own works, there is a searching process in order to discover how we might

enter into the tradition of which he was a part.

One of Franck's students was Charles Tournemire, who succeeded him as organist at St. Clothilde. Tournemire, in turn, was a mentor to Olivier Messiaen. Tournemire was also a great improviser. Maurice Durufle urged Tournemire to write down his improvisations, to no avail. Tournemire would not consent to having his improvisations recorded, so Durufle sneaked a tape recorder into some of the concerts. He eventually taped and subsequently transcribed five of Tournemire's improvisations. These pieces are a window into Tournemire's musical inventions and could, perhaps, also shed light upon the work of Franck, his teacher. I have considered adding the work of Tournemire to this study. I play one of the Tournemire/Durufle improvisations, and, from the design of the piece, I think tempo rubato is its lifeline. Tournemire also recorded some of Franck's works. They are in the Yale library, but not in general circulation. This could be an interesting lesson in interpretation by one who was close to Franck.

Franck taught Tournemire at the Conservatoire and of all of his teachers, Franck was considered the most influential upon him. In turn, Tournemire taught Maurice Durufle and Jean Langlais. Olivier Messiaen acted on occasion as his *suppleant* (temporary replacement) at St. Clothilde and is said to have revered his works. I can see, in Tournemire's writing and in his improvisation transcribed by Durufle, flashes of Messiaen's own writing somewhat later. The function of some passages seems the same as in Messiaen's own works.

The study of the organ works of Cesar Franck, in order to discover some means of approach where rubato is concerned, could possibly open a window into the works of those who studied with him, and for all of those in the line of succession.

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