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Rubato v organových dielach Césara Francka

Rubato in the Organ Works of César Franck

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Abstract

The interpretation of the Franck organ works is difficult from not only technical perspectives, (for example those who have small hands), but from the musical perspectives. Two very important issues are honoring the needs of structure, but also honoring the the Franck traditions of rubato, which largely fall into two types. One school represented by Charles Tournemire, (who studied with César Franck), allows for a good deal of rhythmic freedom. The other tradition represented by Marcel Dupré, (who studied with Felix Alexandre Guilmant) does not use as much rubato, often with steadier tempi, and often with very little freedom. Our aim is to make comparisons between these traditions, and to demonstrate that both have validity.

Keywords: Rubato. Rhythmic freedom. Franck interpretation. Structure. Romanticism.

For those of us that had the fortune of studying in Paris, it is also true that well after that time, I still am changing my opinions regarding the interpretation of the Franck organ works; that applies to when I first started to play them as an undergraduate, and then later studying those works with a French teacher of the organ. Actually, my opinions are constantly evolving, as there are always more and more effective ways to communicate this marvelous music to the many audiences that one plays for.

Honoring structure and freedom is no simple task, and especially when dealing with Franck's compositions which often are multi-sectional. That being said, there are many ways one could approach this goal. Interpretation always needs the mark of individuality of performance, so one has to be careful to not go to extremes when making musical decisions. Finding the correct words to describe a feeling is also not an easy task but among other traits of the Romantic period, three include: individuality, concentration on emotional content, and the battle between „opposites“. Surely the expressiveness that comes with “tempo rubato” (the beat is respected in the left hand but the right hand is freely played), as well as “rubato”, where the left hand as well can also vary from the initial set tempo, should be discussed. In this contribution, I will use the Adagio from the middle section

of César Franck's *Third Chorale in A Minor*, as an example that certainly has the characteristic of „opposites“ regarding what comes before and after, along with beautiful melodic material in the middle section.

The use of rubato of course is a well documented characteristic in Romantic music, but over a period of long phrases or „gestures“. Let's look at the two major traditions that were in play regarding use of rubato in the playing of the Franck organ works. It should be pointed out that there are a host of interpreters that fall into one of the categories below, or someplace between. First the tradition of Charles Tournemire, who studied with César Franck from 1889-1890, (1890 being the year of Franck's death), and whose interpretations are characterised by considerable rhythmic freedom. We do have recordings of Tournemire playing from 1930, for example, his recording of the *Third Chorale* of Franck.

The freedom in the middle section of this chorale is a perfect example of the rubato I am speaking about. Rollin Smith speaks about this concept as he includes Charles Tournemire's writing: „*play the middle section in A-Major very freely, never hurrying and with great freedom. It is a recitative.*“ The recording from 1930 of Tournemire playing this work is available on YouTube and the section I am speaking about begins at 4:31. However, I would suggest listening to the entire recording as it is a wonderful guide to the playing of music from this period. Another advantage is being able to hear the instrument that Franck played at Sainte-Clotilde. Additionally, Rollin Smith in his book „*Towards an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*“ regarding the „*A-Minor Chorale*“, gives specific ideas of places where rubato can be used, as well as putting emphasis on the playing of certain notes (2002, p.103).

This is not to say that every organist must play in exactly the same way, but what is necessary is that there is a freedom of movement, and especially in the *Adagio* or middle section of the *Third Chorale*. As Rollin Smith (2002, p. 103) pointed out, Tournemire says: „*...to play it metronomically would be heresy and absolutely contrary to his intentions.*“ It is a good practice to be moderate in however one chooses to interpret a passage of music and that is especially true in the Franck organ works. These works are very high level compositions, so too much rubato in the performance of them lessens the high quality of the music. On the other hand, too much mechanical playing simply does not represent what we know about Franck and his preferences for the performance of his composition.

There is also disagreement even among advocates of the type of rubato that Tournemire uses in his performance. Jean Langlais (1907-1991) who recorded the complete works of Franck and played with great rhythmic freedom, was known to have said that he believed that Tournemire would not have played the *Third Chorale* the way he did on the 1930 recording. (with the assumption that he had the technology that was available later in the century) I suppose this could be true, but even then, there was the possibility

to record on 2 sides with the old LP technology. Furthermore, listening to Tournemire's playing of Franck's *Cantabile*, or *Pastorale*, there are similarities to how he interprets the *Third Chorale*. What is important is to be inspired by something we hear on a recording but not to copy the idea and this is especially true regarding rubato. The question then becomes what did the composer intend, and what is too little or too much? The answer is the concept of recording our performances and our practice. While there never is a final or absolute answer regarding interpretation, recording both practice and performances are two good ways to evaluate and to make changes if they are needed.

Certainly, in our discussion about what the characteristics of Romanticism include, too little or too much of any trait is subjective. Having the Tournemire recording to use as an example of how Franck's *A-Minor Chorale* sounded being played in 1930 is an invaluable source. The great performers throughout history always have had individualistic interpretations, and so follows the belief that it is important to respect the style without becoming a slave to rules and regulations. On the other hand, it requires a large body of knowledge and experience to know when rubato becomes excessive. In the current times, with so much emphasis on performance practice, and with You Tube and all of the possible recordings one can listen to, it is imperative that we do not lose individuality. Still, there is that fine line where something becomes excessive as is the case with too much, or too little rubato.

Traditions handed down through Tournemire and Franck need to be considered, but equally we must consider individuality which was given a high priority among the Romantics. As teachers we must be careful when and how we communicate ideas regarding rubato to our students. It is spurious that the freedom that comes with rubato is sugary, yet sometimes we must teach students who are very literal and do not understand the differences between freedom in a line and a sugary rubato. The results are performances that are either metronomic or destroy the natural expressiveness of the line. We know in the case of Franck, that rigidity was not his intention. Arriving at the place where all elements of a performance are in good balance is an admirable goal but again not easy to achieve. This fact is especially true in the interpretation of the Franck works for the organ, where too much of anything can also destroy the structure of the composition.



Figure 1: Charles Tournemire at Sainte Clotilde (Smith, 1983, p. 98)

If ever there was a difference between the Franck interpretations of Tournemire and Langlais, those of Marcel Dupré would most certainly have to be mentioned. The description is not meant as a good or bad judgement, but rather a study in contrasts. Michael Murray speaks about the lack of rubato coming from the Franck playing tradition of Guilmant with whom Dupré studied. The fact that Guilmant played the Chorales for an approving Franck before the latter's death in 1890 has been used as a justification for this particular style of interpretation.



Figure 2: Marcel Dupré standing in front of the Cavaillé-Coll organ in his studio (Gallica, 1938, online)

It should be mentioned that my teacher Odile Pierre spoke about the Dupré tradition often in a very positive way. While that may be true, listening to her recordings of Franck in general, and having studied the *Third Chorale in A Minor* with her, Mme Pierre's playing of that particular piece had the mark of Tournemire's interpretation, and especially regarding the central Adagio. In fact, although she was one of Dupré's well known pupils, there was not much similarity to his Franck interpretations at least regarding the interpretation of this Adagio from the *Third Chorale*. Aside from an almost metronomic tempo in the Dupré recording (with little rubato in the Adagio), I would like to mention the repeated notes in this melody, and the difference between Tournemire's rendition, and Dupré's. Dupré uses the system of repeated notes getting half or 3/4 their written value. Since those notes effect rubato, the fact is that the repeated notes in Dupré's performance are executed almost to the point of exaggeration. In Tournemire's rendition, the repeated notes are clear but are much closer together as well as having an elasticity. In Tournemire's performance, the playing of this line is very similar to the way a good Romantic singer or violinist may sing or play it. That same feeling is lacking in the Dupré recording, although on the positive side, the playing has a clarity of sound, as well as a clarity of form. Michael Murray (1998, p. 9) writes: "*It is limiting our experience to our own instrument, and in submitting to habits of mind that can only be called barren, that we organists lose familiarity with artistic truths which conductors, singers, wind and string players and pianists accept as given.*"

Orpha Ochse (1994, p. 3), a well known American musicologist and organist writes, „*In any historical period, musical performance is evaluated in terms of four variables: what is played, how it is played, how it sounds, and how it is heard.*“ Dupré taught some of the greatest interpreters of modern times and several of his pupils went on to record the complete organ works of César Franck. Dupré's pupils are a testament to his greatness as a pedagogue and as a performer. We must mention that although Dupré's teaching is for sure an influence, most of his pupils do not sound alike, nor do many of their Franck recordings sound like his.

The subjectivity of music making keeps coming to mind. It cannot be said that there is one way to interpret Franck's organ works, but still, we are left with a large body of evidence that has been handed down from the 19th Century regarding his performance style, and his preferences. The fact is that Franck, besides being an organist, was also a composer. That characteristic was not unusual as far as the French organ school and continues even in current times.

A comparison of musical parameters from the Adagio section of Franck's *Third Chorale in A minor* is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of musical parameters from the Adagio section of C. Franck's *Third Chorale in A minor* (author's own processing)

	Charles Tournemire	Marcel Dupré
Tempo	- ca 52 to the quarter but very freely with plentiful rubato	- ca 44 to the quarter - less freedom; very steady but still expressive
Repeated notes	- very close	- repeated notes $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ value of printed value; typical Dupré style
Articulation	- legato	- legato
Dynamics	- follows indicated	- follows indicated
Rubato	- very freely	- expressive but freedom more within the beat; a conductable rubato

Summary

One of the great parts of being involved in making music is the fact that one spends their entire life learning and growing. Youth often puts emphasis on virtuosity, and while that is admirable for some music, the end result for music such as Franck's does not give a true picture of his intentions as a composer nor to his music. The opposite also can also be a problem, where lacking technical ability can be a detriment to executing an effective interpretation. Developing a good legato is particularly important and at the same time the left hand as well as voice leading must also be attended to in order to attain a singing line even in the inner parts. Understanding the organs from this period in France as well as the rooms must also be considered in order to arrive at an effective result. The idea that Franck was a composer of many genres of music hopefully will lead to performances that take into account how other musicians besides organists played or sang in the 19th Century. All being considered, the central adagio of the *Third Chorale* must have a singing quality even though it is being played. While there are hosts of recordings of this composition, the best way to arrive at an effective interpretation is to not only record live performances but to make recordings while practicing and then listen carefully to what is being produced.

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