

The Use of Rubato in the Organ Works of César Franck: An Interview with Daniel Roth

Preface

Early in the afternoon of Monday, July 24, several participants in the 2017 French Organ Music Seminar sat in the spacious loft of Notre Dame des Champs in Paris with Daniel Roth, titular of Saint-Sulpice, and Yannick Merlin, titular of Notre Dame des Champs and editor-in-chief of Delatour Publications, discussing the use of rubato in the works of Franck. In the century before Franck, rubato frequently described upper voices which broadened dissonances over accompaniment without changing the rhythm of the *tactus*. Rubato, in Italian, meant "stolen time." Even Mozart in his letters to his family emphasized the importance of keeping strict time in the left hand while elongating dissonances only with the right. In fact in 1778 he and his father talked of those who "dragged the time" and held the whole orchestra back. Frequent alteration of rhythm was not unknown, however, and while Mozart and his father were lamenting the lead feet of certain orchestra profligates, *bel canto* opera divas in Italy were delighting audiences with all kinds of interesting rhythmic variances. (See the book *Stolen Time*, by Richard Hudson, which covers the history of rubato from Gregorian chant to the 20th century).

Of course, altering the rhythm for the sake of the "spirit of the music" was alive and well during the time of Frescobaldi, when in the prefaces to his first and second book of toccatas (1615 and 1624) he stated that the tempo may be slowed down for an expressive section or for passagework and points out that "the performer should not be confined to a steady beat, but instead the beat should conform to the spirit of the music, in accordance with the prevailing expression." Later in the *Fiori musicali* (1635) he suggests that "certain Kyries might be played *vivace* while others are played slowly, in accordance with what the performer considers to be appropriate.

Although in the first part of the 19th century the idea of a strict beat in musical accompaniment continued to dominate, the influx of Romanticism gave more and more license to those who felt music's pulse should be more flexible, such as Beethoven, whose conducting was described by Ignaz von Seyfried as "exactness with respect to expression, including an effective tempo rubato." Published suggestions began to appear, such as in Czerny's works, which furnished musical examples with detailed suggestions for altering tempi along with suggestions for emotions expressed in music that would be heightened by rubato (*Complete Theoretical and Practical Piano Forte School*, Op. 500, 1839). As the century progressed, giants like Chopin, Liszt, and others sealed the popularity of expressive rhythmic alterations with their great concert careers and their composition scores, which had tempo directions such as *ritardando*, *accelerando*, *espressivo*, etc. abundantly indicated. These culminated with the great tempo exaggerations and variations of all kinds of music, from Wagnerian operas and late 19th century tone poems to the piano concertos and symphonic works of Rachmaninoff.

César Franck, born in 1822, entered the world during the greatest flowering of the rubato. Although today we have many indications through the words of his students and others that he made extensive use of rubato practices, there is still much disagreement about the correct way to apply rubato to his twelve very special organ works. It is because of this great disagreement that the scholarly ideas of Daniel Roth, the world-famous organist of Saint-Sulpice, and others immersed in the French tradition, such as editor and musicologist Yannick Merlin, are so important.

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Interview Participants

Yannick Merlin, organist of Notre Dame des Champs, musicologist, and principal editor of Delatour Music Publishers, assisted in the interview.

FOMS participants included Charles Ore, Lois Holdridge, Jill Hunt, Camilla Pugh, Jackie Dahlman, Lynnette McGee, Sook Hyun-Kim, Olga Wong, Mallory Haney, Andrew Segrest, Ellen Jones, Noel Jones, Janice Martel, Connie Melgaard, Phillip Staggs, Masako Gaskin (Co-Director of FOMS), and Christina Harmon. Camilla Pugh, former organist of Sacred Heart Church in Baton Rouge, La., assisted with translating, and Olga Wong, organ scholar at St. Phillip's Presbyterian in Houston, Texas, recorded the interview.

Interview

FOMS: How did the climate in which Franck was raised contribute to his wanting to take such a rubato approach to the organ? Did the pervading style of the time influence him?

DR: Rubato has to do with the personality of every composer more than with a pervading romanticism. Every composer has a different idea of how music should be interpreted, and it has nothing to do with the current style. Rubato is as old as music and as man. In all generations there are people who like to play only the notes and others who like to go further than the notes.

FOMS Even in the Italian Renaissance, for instance, such as with Frescobaldi.

DR For sure, yes. If you study Frescobaldi you see that he wrote in his preface, "when there is a dissonance, please stay on it." It's written in many places. The term "romantic" means nothing in relation to how a composer in that period interprets his music. In every period there are people who are romantic and people who are not.

I think Nicolaus Bruhns is really a romantic personality in Baroque music and that Saint-Saëns, however, is a classical musician in the Romantic period. Mendelssohn, also, was a musician who liked to play music straight and who was very critical of Chopin and Liszt, saying that they played much too freely.

FOMS During the first part of the 19th century in France, cultural factors caused by the demands of war so diminished the quality of music that the beat and its possible alterations ceased to be of much importance. In this music, liberties could be so preposterous that a real musician such as Saint-Saëns doubtlessly reacted in the other direction, against the cheap interpretations of the day.

DR Yes, but it had to do with his personality as well. Saint-Saëns was a kind of musician whose heart was in tune with the classical giants of the world - Rameau, Bach, Handel, and others.

FOMS And of course Saint-Saëns was exposed to the teachings of Lemmens, since he was the organist at La Madeleine during the time that the Bach revival by Lemmens was underway in Paris. Was César Franck similarly exposed?

DR Franck was certainly impressed, like all Parisians, by the wonderful technique of Lemmens, especially the pedal technique, and therefore bought a pedal board for his piano to improve his pedal technique. But Maurice Emmanuel, who was the choir master in Ste-Clotilde during the timewhen Franck was the organist there, tells us that Franck was little concerned about the absolute legato that Lemmens and his disciples created.

FOMS In succeeding generations, one generation has one style, and the next one tends to turn its back on the preceding one, like clothing. Style is continually changing, for example, in the visual arts. Is our present interpretation of Franck related to style?

DR There are several traditions coming down from César Franck: Tournemire-Durufflé; Tournemire-Langlais; Guilmant-Dupré. Guilmant was complimented on his Franck playing by the composer. The problem is that every interpreter adds more or less to the "tradition!!!!" So we must do much research to know the composer the best.

YM Recently I found a score of Franck's Pièce Héroïque that belonged to Guilmant. Unfortunately there are not many written indications from the hand of Guilmant, which probably means that this original edition is rather reliable. This score is part of a private collection and cannot yet be made public.

DR The Trois Pièces in the Bibliothèque Nationale have notations and registrations by César Franck as well, made for his concert at the Trocadéro Cavaillé-Coll organ.

FOMS Is this the only score?

YM No, there are more, and research is presently underway.

FOMS Some of Franck's notations for the Trois Pièces are in the Durand edition.

DR Yes, but Franck's notations and registrations in the Durand edition are for the Ste-Clotilde organ, and most of them are different than the ones made for the Trocadéro organ in the Bibliothèque Nationale autograph.

FOMS Why do we not have the ability to publish the Franck scores in the Bibliothèque Nationale?

YM No publisher has had the courage and the good idea to publish the facsimiles of the manuscripts of Franck which are in the Bibliothèque Nationale. However, Bibliothèque Nationale now has online two important documents of Franck: an epoch edition of the Six Pieces (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b520009240>), and the Final <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55007037g.r=cesar%20franck%20orgue?rk=193134;0>).

FOMS Does M. Roth know about the priest at Notre Dame des Champs who is a relative of the Franck family?

YM In fact this priest is the direct descendant of the cousin of César Franck's wife. He kindly gave me excerpts from a private diary of the sister of that cousin who had been a pupil of César Franck, as well as his cousin who eventually became the composer's wife. There are interesting details about Franck's life in the 1840's, shortly before his marriage, until the early childhood of his son Georges. In reaction to the kindness and confidence of this priest, I have organized a "César Franck Itinerary" in Paris for the 2017-2018 season. I have appealed to the organists who want to join this tribute in several places in Paris. Thus there will be Franck concerts in the churches of Saint-Laurent with Beatrice Piertot (original organ of Merklin known by Franck at the end of his life); Saint-Augustin with Didier Matry (Gigout's organ. Gigout was a close friend of Franck's); Saint-Sulpice with S.-V. Cauchefer-Choplin; and Notre-Dame-des-Champs, where I. Lesage, violinist, and I will play a transcription of the Violin Sonata, and Franck choral motets will be sung (Notre-Dame-des-Champs was the parish church of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll and Franck was on the jury when the first organ titular was appointed in 1877, just after the Cavaillé-Coll organ was built).

FOM: And now, getting back to rubato in Franck: the students of Franck: Mahaut, Marty, Vierne, Pierné, Tournemire, and others. All related that Franck played his own compositions extremely freely.

DR All of his students said the same thing. Some said he played so freely that one could not recognize the piece.

FOMS It is said also that Marchal passed on the great tradition of playing Franck. Do you agree?

DR He played Franck very beautifully but perhaps with not enough rubato, and it is a pity that he did not respect the registrations, but used high pitched mixtures and mutations.

FOMS Even though Marchal knew the registration that Franck wanted, the style during Marchal's time was to use neo-classical sounds.

DR The neo classical organists did not like the Cavaillé-Coll organ. They thought that the neo-classical organ sound could be all things to all people. Therefore they did not do the registrations of Franck! Unfortunately many organists still don't care about playing authentically, like Jean Guillou, who thinks that when he performs a piece of music it is HIS piece and so he does what he wants with it: the registrations, the touch (he likes to use a very short staccato for example), and the tempo alterations.

FOMS Since Marchal was so close to Franck it is sure that he was in touch with what Franck wanted. Therefore it is sad that his performances did not always reflect Franck's ideas. Today, in the same way, we alter Shakespeare performances and cast 19th century operas in contemporary settings. It will never stop. There will always be a new way to play César Franck. So we ask the question again: How can we find and preserve the real tradition of playing Franck?

DR The organ music by Franck sounds TRUE only when we try to approach Franck's sound-world as near as possible: especially touch, registration, and rubato. We need much research in order to know as best as possible the time in which Franck lived, and to know his personality. For registrations we should know in depth the Cavaillé-Coll organ of Ste-Clotilde, 1859. This is difficult because today this organ has nothing to do with the Cavaillé aesthetic. Tournemire started to change it fundamentally in 1933, and after that Langlais and Taddei changed it some more. The best way is to read articles and testimonies about it by organists who played it before 1933, such as Maurice Duruflé and André

Fleury. We spoke already about rubato touch. Also important are the analyses of the music - melody, harmony, and rhythm.

FOMS Concerning rubato, you mentioned that there is a book analyzing rubato from Gregorian chant through the 20th century.

DR It is a big book, called *Stolen Time*, written by Richard Hudson. He followed the evolution of rubato, including the important idea of free melody over an unwavering *tactus* in Mozart, and from there to the complete rhythmic fluctuation of the middle and late 19th century.

FOMS Do we have examples of recordings besides Tournemire's of Franck students playing Franck's rubato?

DR I remember a very beautiful recording of Gabriel Pierné, a student of Franck, conducting *Psyché* with the Colonne orchestra.

YM We know that Franck's students, particularly Marty, said that Franck told them to play extremely freely.. Also we have an edition in print of the Franck Three Chorals by Duruflé (Durand edition, 1973), who was a pupil of Tournemire, which has all the tempi of Franck printed, and which should be a good place to start. Duruflé explains in his preface, "I have, however, allowed myself, without subtracting anything from the original edition, to add some annotations in parentheses concerning the movements, nuances, and some *ritenuto*, and *tempo poco animando*, which are only suggestions. They have been pointed out to me by my master Charles Tournemire, who was the pupil of Franck."

YM In the Franck score of the Three Chorals, annotated by Duruflé (Durand edition), the tempo markings were by Tournemire, since Tournemire played the chorals for Franck.

DR There is a little book by Tournemire, César Franck, in which he gives the tempi of all twelve Franck pieces.

YM Another place is a letter of Franck written to an American pupil in which he lists the tempi of some of his organ pieces (*Prélude*, *Fugue*, and *Variation*, *Pastorale*, *Priere*, etc.). You can find the article about this, written by Rollin Smith (César Franck's Metronome Marks from Paris to Brooklyn), in *The American Organist*, September 2003, pp. 58-60.

DR In general it is not good to indicate a metronomic tempo for an organ piece because an organist always has to adapt the tempo to the room in which he plays: little church, big cathedral, concert hall, no reverberation, 2, 3, seconds, 10, 12 seconds! Many composers had metronomes which were not perfectly functioning. Others read the metronome the wrong way. Vierne, especially, because of his partial blindness, often read the tempo on the metronome from the bottom of the weight instead of the top. Some Vierne tempi are right and some are wrong. His *Symphonie III* is a case in point: all the movements have the wrong metronome markings except for the 2nd and 3rd movements.

FOMS What about Widor metronome markings?

DR The tempi in Widor are usually ok.

I had a friend from Nantes who told me about a lesson he had with Dupré on one of his "Stations of the Cross." When Dupré said that he was playing it way too fast, my friend showed him the metronome marking and he answered, "Oh, this was just a sin of my youth!"

The tempi of Duruflé are generally marked much too fast as well. His wife told me this.

FOMS Although Mme. Duruflé was known for her ability to play them according to the indications anyway.

Returning again to rubato in Franck, how can we overcome the tradition of playing Franck in strict time which grew out of the teachings of Widor, Dupré, and Falcinelli? How did it get started and why is it still going on today? Can you talk about the schools that developed through Widor?

DR Rolande Falcinelli was a student of Marcel Dupré and she continued the Dupré tradition as successor of Dupré at the Paris conservatoire, but with some differences. Her Franck interpretation was different! I heard her play the Prière in a very VERY beautiful way. Also, through studying the Chorals with her I was able to see the difference!

Widor and Dupré were very different interpreters: Dupré hated the rubato, whereas Widor used a lot of agogic accents in order to INTERPRET the musical text. He asks for rubato in the Symphonie Romane, but for sure did not play the repertoire with as much rubato as César Franck. Although Widor and Dupré both claim the Lemmens tradition, they played very differently !!!!

FOMS What caused Dupré to play this way so unwaveringly?

DR His personality. He did not care so much about what the composer thought. He played the whole repertoire with the rules by Lemmens: perfect legato, half value staccato, with neo-classical registrations and very straight!

FOMS Why is it still so popular to play this way?

DR It's easier for the interpreter and for the lay person to listen to. The interpreter does not have to care about what happens behind the notes!!! And with agogic and rubato playing there is always the great danger of making too much of it!!! If the rhythm is steady then the listener [and player] doesn't have to call upon his deeper, more introspective side. For example, if you play the Prière strictly in time, it is easier to play and to listen to than if you have to think about what is going on.

FOMS Dupré played this way, then, for the sake of his audiences, since he played to large crowds all over the world.

DR Yes, and he had great technique to show off. He was a great virtuoso, a great improviser, and a great composer. Such virtuosity caused great enthusiasm in people.

FOMS In other words, the faster one plays the more the audience is impressed.

DR: "Can you see my fingers? - I play faster than my colleague."

FOMS What are the best ways that we can today infuse the organ world with right interpretations of Franck's music?

DR First ask: what is the world of César Franck? Do deep analysis. What is Franck's "sounding universe?" What is his art of touch? What was his world of organ colors? What was his agogic ideal? Every composer has a sounding universe. We must do this with every composer. Ravel says "Play my notes." And when you play Ravel that way, it's so beautiful. It's the same when you play Dupré straight. When you play rubato in Dupré it sounds wrong.

FOMS If teachers have their students go back to what they think is the right tradition of playing Franck, will all of their students end up sounding alike? This is the fear of many students - that they will graduate sounding just the same as their teachers.

DR No. You must play with your personality and your heart. If the sound world of a composer is like a garden, there are, inside the garden, many possibilities to be different.

FOMS And there must be innate musical ability. Certain ideas in Franck, however, are sacrosanct. For instance motives repeated three times can't be played the same way.

DR Yes, and even when a motive is repeated two times! But this is as old as music. In all music, either you do an echo or you change the touch or you use agogic accents.

FOMS Is it wrong to put one's own personality into one's performance?

DR First you have to serve the composer. Our personality will appear when we have to take decisions in passages where we cannot find the will of the composer

FOMS How do I know when I have over- injected my own personality into what I am playing?

DR You will know when you have studied the piece very well, and when you know good the sound world of the composer. The sound world has limits.

FOMS: Knowledge first, but afterwards it must give way to feeling and personality.

To sum up our conversation: there are organists all over the world today who run through Franck for the sake of their own virtuosity. Duprè and Falcinelli were only two. And not only Americans race through Franck. There are prominent French organists who also race through Franck with only a minimum amount of rubato.

For better and for worse, Duprè had some very powerful DNA which influenced performance practices of many composers.

DR Yes. In fact, Duprè claimed he had a direct line to Bach which went through Guilman - Lemmens - Hesse - Kittel to Bach.

There was an interesting revolution in articulation which occurred at the end of the 18th century which caused the little articulations used by Bach and the other composers before the Romantic period to go out of vogue. By the middle of the 19th century substitution and legato had taken over. In all the German organ methods at the beginning of the 19th century legato also took over.

FOMS And these ideas only loosened their grip on the music of Bach after the death of Duprè in 1971, despite the efforts of Heiller, Tagliavini, and Walcha in the 60's.

YM: It's an easier way to play Bach. With the Duprè method of playing Bach, you don't have to think. Everything is indicated in every detail.

FOMS So many have continued to play Bach in the style of Duprè in spite of all the advanced scholarship that exists today.

DR But others changed immediately. Marie Claire Alain was a student of Duprè but she immediately changed her way of playing Bach when teaching in Haarlem with Tagliavini and Heiller. The Baroque articulations she learned opened up a whole new world for her.

FOMS The renewed interest in the harpsichord through Leonhardt was also helpful in developing Bach techniques. On the other hand, many prominent American organists kept teaching substitution in Bach until they retired. The many editions of the Gleason Method kept the substitution tradition alive.

Returning to Franck: I hope that organists interested in scholarship will continue to help others understand the importance and the beauty of the Franck rubato.

DR There will always be some who will understand, and others who won't be interested.

YM & DR You can find books free on the internet on Franck (in French) by two of Franck's students: Albert Mahaut(<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k855380w>) and Vincent D'Indy (<http://archive.org/details/csarfranck00indy>). In English translation: <https://archive.org/details/csarfrancktran00indy>). D'Indy was criticized for his way of talking about Franck, but what he said was interesting. One should have a critical reading of his book.

FOMS Most Americans can't read French. But in English there are books by Rollin Smith, Lawrence Archbold, and William Peterson, and of course books on other organists of the period, such as the Orpha Ochse book and books on Saint-Saëns, Widor, and Vierne by John Near and Rollin Smith. But it is not the same as reading books by the actual Franck students!

YM The most complete biography about Franck is probably that of Joel-Marie Fauquet (Fayard), but it is only in French. Fauquet has found manuscripts and sources which have enabled him to publish new versions of works by

Franck (editions du Marais-Jobert), for example the organ piece from 1854 (in A major, performed for the inauguration of the Organ of Saint-Eustache) or the Sonata for violin and piano.

FOMS What is your present project?

DR I am working on two compositions for choir, orchestra, and organ for an ecumenical service on October 3 in Mainz commemorating the unification of Germany.

FOMS We wish you great success in this endeavor, and thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today and for helping us understand the importance of rubato in the music of Franck, and for understanding the importance of scholarship in music in general!