

Rubato and the Creative Performer: Between Freedom and Structure in Performance

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Tempo rubato is a multifaceted phenomenon which is strongly associated with creativity and expression, and is very much related to performance style. Rubato can take the form of more or less delicate timing fluctuations of 'give and pay back' to mark the boundaries of a phrase or a section; a more declamatory-oriented suppleness in shaping the moment-to-moment of the performance as means for conveying shades of moods; or a larger-scale of rhythmical freedom which may sound as an arbitrary rhythm, and which can get extreme to a point that doesn't allow recognizing the metrical organization indicated by the score.

All these forms pose problems for the study of rubato. The timing can be measured, of course, but the impact of rubato on the expressive qualities of a performance can be very elusive (Slide 2). In the context of a discussion of Casals' rubato, David Blum (1977) says he feels in the position of "[...] a medieval theologian seeking to specify the weight of an angel." And adds "How right was Leopold Mozart when he wrote: 'What this stolen time is can more easily be shown than described.'"¹

In addition to creativity and expression, the shaping of rubato is often associated with freedom and spontaneity (Slide 3): Maurizio Pollini is quoted saying "Rubato must emerge spontaneously from the music, it can't be calculated but must be totally free. It's not even something you can teach [...]. Rubato isn't something you can rationalize."²

The sense of being unplanned associated with tempo rubato lead performers to extreme temporal freedom, which is sometimes associated with mannerism. I'd like to focus our discussion today on what performers actually do, and to avoid as much as possible moral questions relating to what they should, or are allowed to do. In order to contextualize our discussion along these lines, here is an extreme example of rubato, which I think would be useful to bear in mind while we examine the case studies. Here is *Syrinx* by Debussy in a live performance of Georges Barrère, who is

¹ Blum (1977), p. 82.

² Interviewed by Carsten Dürer, editor in chief of PIANONews, Deutsche Grammophon, 7/2005.

one of the leading figures of the French School. This is a live recording made in 1939. The quality of the recording is very low, but gives an indication of the amount of freedom taken by Barrère (Slide 4, listen bars 1-8).

But rubato is not always associated with complete freedom and arbitrariness of rhythm as in Barrère's example, and performers use different oxymoronic metaphors to describe the concept of structured rubato (Slide 5). Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger presents testimonies of Liszt as saying: "Look at these trees! [Liszt] said, the wind plays among them, the tree remains the same, that is *Chopinesque rubato*."³ David Blum also refers to this image in relation to Casals, who is quoted saying "Fantasy as much as you like — but with order!", and advising to play with 'rubato which is not a rubato...'.⁴ Pianist Claude Frank often quotes in his teaching Arthur Schnabel's description of rubato as 'walking freely on a firm ground'.

Having in mind these associations of rubato with creativity, expression, freedom, and yet some kind of guiding structure, I shall focus today on two examples of extreme rubato performed by Casals and Rampal, and will examine the possibility that the freedom from the framework provided by the score is actually governed by an underlying alternative organisation.

The method of work consists of tracing the performance's grouping structure, or phrasing, alongside analyzing the metrical structure that emerges from the ways the segmentations in the musical flow are shaped. The timing data generated from this analysis refers to the performance's pulse as created by the performer's choices, rather than analyzing the performance in relation to the nominal values indicated by the score. I would like to emphasize that my method of work includes first observing the performance's grouping, and only then examining the timing data.

Very briefly, the method brings together four different prisms (slide 6): The first is the metaphorical image of the gesture, which relates to how performers shape the moment-to-moment of the performance as a metaphor of movement, which is communicative and emotionally meaningful (Leech-Wilkinson, 2009). The second prism involves focusing on the performer's use of grouping structure, and applying principles derived from Lerdahl and Jackendoff's *Generative Theory* (1983) to analyse the performance. The third prism involves considering the expectations

³ Liszt/Niecks, II, p. 101, quoted in Eigeldinger (1986), p. 51.

⁴ Blum (1977), p. 85.

raised by the performance's structural grouping in relation to both the short and long term of the performance (Huron, 2007; Cohen, 1994).

As you'll see, I used slightly different methods to communicate my ideas in each one of the two case studies. The performing scores I'll be using are not aimed at turning the performance into a new type of text, but at creating what John Rink (1994) calls an 'aural image' of the performance in the case of Casals, or what might have been a 'mental script' of Rampal's approach to *Syrinx*.

Let us start by examining Casals' recording of the Prelude from Bach's Suite no. 4 in E-flat major BWV 1010 made in 1939.⁵

Bach's Prelude is written in four-crochet bars organised in two minims per bar, which creates—with the exception of three places—an uninterrupted movement of broken chords in quavers, with a repeated pattern of the first crochet as a bass note. Casals' relates to the rhythmical structure as specified by the score in a quite a personal way.

Let us listen to three passages to get an impression of the amount of freedom taken by Casals (slides 7 and 8; listen bars 1-9; bars 59-62, and bars 86-91).

So, is this unpredictable phrasing shaped somehow arbitrarily, or can we trace an alternative order which Casals' fantasy follows?

At this point, let us liberate ourselves from our knowledge of the score, and pretend, just for a moment, that except for the recording by Casals, all scores and recordings of the Prelude have disappeared, and our task is to reconstruct the lost score from it. It's not an easy task, as listening very closely to Casals' organisation of timing and shaping the gestures reveals that he creates an ambiguity regarding the metrical structure of the piece.

The opening bars may be perceived as Bach's Prelude was written with nine quavers per bar, organised in a pattern of a quaver for the bass note followed by seven semiquavers. The organisation of the stresses within the bar consists of a long and

⁵ Victor 12-0890/6 in set DM-1302, matrix no. 2LA 3116.

stressed group, followed by a short one, in proportions of almost 2:1, or a dotted crochet followed by a dotted quaver (slide 9, listen bars 1-8, conduct).

The auditory effect created by reversing the attention from binary to triple organisation brings to mind the visual illusion created by Rubin's 'faces-vase' figure mentioned by Sloboda (slide 10),⁶ which affords shifting between being seen as a white vase on a black background and as two black faces looking at each other across a white background. Sloboda brings this example to demonstrate the cognitive capacity to shift the focal attention to different musical parts. Thus, as in Rubin's example, Casals' performance affords the possibility of alternating between two metrical structures by shaping the passage in the ratio of 2:1, which is a form of binary metre, and which allows the illusion to take place.

Casals' shaping of the passages which deviate from the broken chords pattern emphasises this metric ambiguity even further, and I shall look in detail into two of these passages.

This is the passage between bars 59 to 61 which leads to the G minor section as written in the score (slide 11). Casals shapes the first bars in two groups per bar by considerably emphasising the first note of each group. His rhythmical organisation of the passage can be read on two levels of performance pulse, which combine binary and triple metres (slide 12).

The first level of pulse—represented by the lower slurs—is shaped in three crochets. It is marked by the duration of the dominant ninth chord to G minor in bar 59, which together with the three groups of semiquavers that follow create a metre of three crochets per bar. Bar 60 similarly consists of two performance pulses, but bar 61 consists of three performance pulses. Here again, the pulses are organised in long-short durations in an almost 2:1 ratio (note the most exact proportion is in the first group of bar 60, 1'11" and 0'55"). The deeper level of pulse—the upper slurs in my notation—counterbalances the ternary organisation by including four deep performance pulses, lasting around 3'5" (listen bars 59-61, conduct first level 2,2,3).

Another example is the passage that follows the reprise, which consists of the deviation from the opening bars, leading to the end of the movement (slide 13). As

⁶ Sloboda (1988), p. 168.

demonstrated in Casals' performance score (slide 14), the emphasis on the D in bar 88 groups it separately from the semiquavers that follow. The next four groups consist of three crochets each. As for the performance pulse and the metre shaped by these groupings, Casals' slowing down in bar 87 prepares a new pulse, and the duration of 2'03" of the emphasised D in bar 88 serves as the new performance pulse, and as a reference for the four groups of three crochets that follow. In other words, the duration of the minim in bar 87 turns into the duration of three crochets in bar 88. On a deeper level, the six groups are organised in a binary organisation of four and two, counterbalancing the triple metre (listen bars 86-91, conduct level 1).

At this point, let us leave Casals' example for a moment, and move on to the recording of Debussy's *Syrinx* by Jean-Pierre Rampal made in 1949.⁷ As we'll see, Rampal's performance of *Syrinx* raises the issue of the ways performers relate to the score, so I shall say a word about the manuscript and different editions of the piece. *Syrinx* was written in 1913 as incidental music for Gabriel Mourey's dramatic poem *Psyché*, and premiered privately in Paris by Louis Fleury, who seems to be the only one who had a copy of the piece (slide 15). This is the Wiener Urtext Edition from 1996 based on a manuscript found recently in a private collection in Brussels, which is probably the copy used by Fleury for his performances.⁸ An interesting point to note here that unlike the way the piece is often performed by flute alone, according to this manuscript, the text and music are intertwined.

This manuscript presents few problems: it contains two or three different styles of handwriting, probably none by Debussy. An important point to note in relation to Rampal's performance we'll hear in a minute is that according to Robert Orledge in his book *Debussy and the Theatre* (1982), the original piece did not include bar lines. The bar lines which we see here were added by Marcel Moyse in the 1st edition. Here is the first edition published by Jobert in 1927 (slide 16). It is not clear which copy was used by Jobert for preparing it, and as you can see, it is very different from the Urtext one. This edition served as the only reference available until the late 20th century, and is probably the one used by Rampal in the recording we'll discuss today.

⁷ Boîte A Musique 65, matrix no. Partx 7064-1, M3 118680.

⁸ Ljungar-Chpelon, (1996).

The well-known story of *Syrinx* tells about the frightening figure of Pan, who was half human half goat—the term panic is named after him—and the nymph *Syrinx* with whom Pan fell in love. He ran after her and just before he reached her she turned herself into a reed, from which he prepared his flute.

Traditionally, *Syrinx* is performed with much temporal freedom—this is a tempo graph of the recordings of *Syrinx* made until 1950 (slide 17). The blue line is of Barrère's performance we've heard. This graph (slide 18) doesn't include Barrère in order to give a better presentation of the tempo fluctuations of the other performances. As you can see, all the performers here relate to the score in a very free way, and Rampal's performance (yellow line) is not exceptional from that respect.

In Rampal's performance, the duration of the crochets varies a great deal (slide 19). The duration of the shortest beat is 0.63 of a second (beat 2 bar 3), and the longest beat lasts 1.88 (beat 1 bar 2). In other words, the longest beat is approximately three times faster than the shortest beat, and the fermata in bar two and the *ritenuto* ending the section are not taken into account in this calculation. Let us listen to this section, and I would like to invite you to conduct while we listen to become fully aware of the amount of freedom taken here (listen bars 1-8).

Here again, let us liberate ourselves from the score for a moment, and focus on the ways Rampal's metrical and grouping structures are shaped (slide 20). Following the pulse created by Rampal's performance and not the beats indicated by the score reveals two deeper levels of pulse, or hypermetric pulses, which are much more regular. Time is too short to analyse this in much detail, so I shall point out only some of the strategies used by Rampal in shaping this approach.

Rampal's grouping of the first phrase corresponds to the score's beats. However, while the score's phrase consists of two bars, the performance consists of three performance pulses. The first performance pulse follows the first bar and is shaped in one gesture, creating a unit of reference or *tactus*, to borrow Lerdahl and Jackendoff's use of the term. The second pulse starts on the second bar, with an accent on the opening B-flat, similar to the accent on the opening B-flat note of the piece, consistent with Lerdahl's and Jackendoff's rule of the grouping of parallels. The extremely long B-flat and the pause that follow create an expectation for the continuation of movement, and the need to fill up the time creates a third pulse.

Rampal's second phrase starts on bar 3 and also consists of three pulses. The first, in bar 3, is made of a similar gesture of the opening bar. The second pulse involves a gesture emphasising the transition between the B-flat and B-natural, which is made by the lengthening of time and change of colour. And the third pulse consists of the short notes of bar 4 and the repeated motif of the B-flat leading to B-natural. The 3rd phrase also consists of 3 'beats'. The long pause in bar 5 serves as clear boundary, and the second and third pulses, starting on the long C-flat and E-flat, are marked by an accent on the beginning of each one of the notes.

In this level, the duration of the pulse varies between 3.08 and 3.90 seconds, with only a 26% difference between the shortest and longest 'beats'. The only exception is the last pulse, which is considerably longer, as Rampal seems to respond to the *Retenu* instruction of the score. The point is that these relatively regular pulses are independent of the nominal values indicated by the score. The pulses last from less than two beats (in the second pulse of the second performance-phrase), to almost two bars (in the second pulse of the third phrase), both of a similar length of around 3.5 seconds. The shortening of the C-flat note in bars 6 and 7 to almost half of the beats' duration in the previous bar is an extreme example of the way Rampal changes the score's nominal values to match the performance's metrical re-organisation of the piece (listen bars 1-8, conduct).

Focusing on the longer term of the performance reveals that Rampal's organisation creates an even deeper level of pulse consisting of three long phrases. Each one of the phrases on the deeper level consists of three pulses of the upper level, which is of course not an arbitrary organisation, as the piece is written in 3. In the first phrase, the long pause at the end of the second bar creates a clear boundary. In the second phrase, bars 3,4, and the beginning of bar 5 are grouped in one gesture by keeping the flow in the short notes, and by not emphasising the change of colour between the B-flat and the B-natural in bar 5 as previously done in bar 4. In the third phrase, the long pause after the b natural in bar 5, and the shortening of the long C natural in bars 6 and 7, group the last three and a half bars together.

According to the score, the third phrase is almost double the length of the first one. Interestingly, in Rampal's performance, the phrases last between 9.85 and 12.7 seconds, with a difference of 22% between the longer and shorter phrases. Taking into account the length of the phrases in question, this difference is relatively

marginal, and clearly much smaller than the 300% difference between the crochet's beats. It is interesting to note that, unlike the expectation that the short units should be more or less similar in length and that the time differences between them should increase when the units get longer, in Rampal's performance, the longer the section is, the more regular it becomes.

Rampal's shaping of *Syrinx* presents an extension of the concept of 'compensating rubato', which refers to the general idea that time lost by shortening note values or accelerating at one point in the music must be proportionally compensated for at another point. In Rampal's case, the notion of juxtaposing freedom and structure is kept, but can be understood only if we base the discussion on the performance's grouping, which allows us to consider the way the performer re-writes the score.

It is also interesting to consider Rampal's performance in terms of phrase arching (slide 21). While the score's beat gives an unpredictable zigzagged curve—demonstrated in the lower graph—the performance pulse creates a clear phrase arching—demonstrated in the upper graph. Interestingly, the multi-layers of freedom within structure is emphasized if we consider the dynamic changes, which are highly correlated with the score's crochet beat (slide 22, the orange line, lower graph).

So what can these two cases tell us about the question we started with regarding what actually happens in cases of extreme rubato?

The first issue that comes to mind is the flexible and personal way both performers relate to the score. In Rampal's case, the score functions as a departure point, providing a context for Rampal to shape his narrative. Casals seems to refer to Bach's notation as a skeleton, or a script, to use Nicholas Cook's term (2001), rather than as text that needs to be followed to the letter. In other words, in their search for meaning, both performers confidently mould the information provided by the score to a point of re-writing it, which gives a new and interesting perspective on the partnership between composers and performers and insight into the way we understand and experience music.

These cases provides us with food for thought also regarding the nature of creativity, and the strategies used by performers for generating expressivity in performance. In both cases, Casals and Rampal creatively and coherently combine what seems like opposing qualities: Rampal's performance affords both a sense of freedom shaped

by the unpredictable fluctuations of dynamics and timbre, and a sense of clear organisation achieved by phrase arching the temporal dimension of the performance. Casals' performance keeps a coherent discourse while elastically shifting from binary to triple metres in a context that traditionally requires unified metre. The navigation between these opposing qualities results in a sense of tension which contributes to the expressive qualities of these performances.

Two interesting questions are raised here: the first is to what extent the performers are aware of this extreme manipulation of the score and the alternative organisation that emerges from it; and the second is to what extent the structured rubato, which seems so fresh, is spontaneously shaped. The notions of 'fantasy with order', 'a rubato which is not a rubato', and the image of 'walking freely on a firm ground' by Casals and Schnabel mentioned earlier, suggest that there might be at least some level of awareness and pre-planning. Maybe in this realm which affords a co-existing of opposites, creativity means a spontaneous planning of a structured rubato?

To conclude, clearly, these examples are only the tip of the iceberg. A preliminary study I made of recordings by Glen Gould and Arthur Rubinstein indicates other kinds of underlying organization and different strategies for shaping it. The challenge now, it seems, is to explore the rich possibilities arising from analysing a performance's attributes independently from the score's instructions. Studying cases of extreme rubato by using this approach may allow us to gain a better understanding of the nature of creativity in performance, and as put by John Rink, Neta Spiro and Nicholas Gold, to "understand what we are listening to but possibly unable to hear."⁹

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⁹ Rink, Spiro, and Gold (2011), p. 290.

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