

OF RUBATO SYSTEMATIZATION IN THE FIRST BARS OF CHOPIN'S NOCTURNE NO. 1

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, the concept of *rubato* in music¹ marks the practice of performing with rhythmic freedom (speeding up and/or slowing down). A representative of the Italian Baroque vocal arts, Pier Francesco Tosi is regarded to be the first who used, in his treatise (1723), the term *rubare* (Hudson 1997; Rosenblum 1994), to discuss the ways of expressive singing:

Whoever does not know how to steal Time [*rubare il Tempo*] in Singing, knows not how to Compose, nor to Accompany himself, and is destitute of the best Taste and greatest Knowledge. | The stealing of Time, in the *Pathetick*, is an honourable Theft in one that sings better than others, provided he makes a Restitution with Ingenuity. (Tosi 1743: 156)²

However, the idea of stolen time as the liberty (or flexibility) of time as a style of singing had already been emphasized a century earlier by another Italian author, Giulio Caccini (1551–1618), who in *Le nuove musiche* (1601–1602) mentioned *sprezzatura*, a kind of ornamentation that enables the singer to express the emotion of the word without being restricted by the tempo:

Whence may appear that noble manner (as I call it) which, not submitting to strict time but often halving the value of the notes according to the ideas of the text, gives rise to that kind of singing with so-called “negligence” [*sprezzatura*]. (Caccini 2009: 55)³

Usually, in musical practice two conventional ways of expressing *rubato* are distinguished:

1) the flexible ornamentation of melody runs upon the regular accompaniment (e.g. in piano playing, the freedom of tempo and rhythm is achieved under the strict pulse of eighth-notes in arpeggios in the left hand in piano playing);

2) the flexibility manifests itself both in the melody and accompaniment (no accurate timing in both hands).

Both ways characterize the contrametrics in the vertical of musical time (contrametric *rubato*) rather than the flexibility of tempo using quickening and slowing (*ritardando* or *accelerando*, known as agogic *rubato*). Most often the irregularity of musical rhythm, meter, and/or tempo is not indicated in the score, but expressed by performers liberally (personally). Therefore the use of *rubato* results in the uniqueness of interpretation and a variety of artistic insights; as regarded by Polish pianist and pedagogue Paderewski:

¹ ‘Stolen time,’ derived from Italian *rubare* – ‘steal.’

² The original in Italian manuscript: “Chi non fa rubare il Tempo cantando, non fa comporre, né accompagnarfi, e refta privo del miglior gufto, e della maggiore intelligenza. | Il rubamento di Tempo nel patetico e un gloriofo latrocinio di chi canta meglio degli altri, purché l'intendimento, e l'ingegno ne facciano una bella reftituzione.” (*Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato di Pierfrancesco Tosi*, 1723, page 99).

³ Fragment in Italian manuscript: “Avvenga che nobile maniera sia così appellata da me quella, che va usata, senza sottoporsi a misura ordinaria, facendo molte volte il valore delle note la metà meno secondo i concetti delle parole, onde ne nasce quel canto poi in sprezzatura, che si è detto (...) senza misura quasi favellando in armonia con la suddetta sprezzatura.” (*Le nuove musiche di Giulio Caccini detto romano*. In Firenze apresso I Marescotti, 1601, introduction page XI).

Tempo Rubato is a potent factor in musical oratory, and every interpreter should be able to use it skillfully and judiciously, as it emphasizes the expression, introduces variety, infuses life into mechanical execution. (Finck 1913: 459)

2. Background

This paper analyzes different manifestations of *rubato* in the case of Frédéric Chopin's (1810–1849) Nocturne in B flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1. The very first nocturne in Chopin's legacy of 21 examples of this genre was composed in 1830–1831 (Vienna and Paris), published in 1833, and dedicated to Maria Camillowa Pleyel, wife of the publisher and virtuoso pianist Camille Pleyel.

According to Mieczysław Tomaszewski, the composition “emerges from silence ...” (Tomaszewski 2016). Actually, the performance of this “emergency” in the first four bars may show a diversity of interpretations using the different approaches to the same musical text. In mm. 1–4 we face an irregularity of rhythm and subtly personified playing of ornamentations; the irregularity of motion is achieved in the right hand playing freely the various groups of eighth-notes (4, 6, 11, 22), whereas the left hand accompanies with eighth-note arpeggios.

The research was based on 42 recordings ranging from 1928 to 2015, among them 29 studio and 13 live performances.⁴ The collected recordings were implemented by 32 pianists of different ages; some performers were examined from more than one recording (see Table 1). Different human recordings were analyzed taking into account the level of disagreement in the vertical of the score, calculation of total time and length of mm. 1–4 (because of highly varying tempo), performance of particular ornamentations, etc.

The human performances were compared to the computer-generated sample recording based on the exact representation of original tempo (MM = 116) and strict rhythmic pulse. The examination and comparison of recording examples showed the gradual enrichment of interpretations with the features of *rubato*—manipulation with motion and rhythmic freedom. This allowed the determination of four particular groups of pianists, ranging from rather strict and stable tempo motion to a highly individual kind of narrativeness of sound. Therefore, the interpretations placed in the first and fourth groups are radically opposite; for example, it is worth mentioning the recordings by the legendary pianist Leopold Godowsky (celebrated for his gorgeous singing tone, beautifully balanced voicing, and masterful pedaling) versus Andrei Gavrilov (one of the most controversial, charming, and unpredictable performers in the current piano world).

3. Systematization of piano performances

A computer-generated sound pattern was used as the starting point for analyzing the human recordings. The pattern is characterized by the original metrical implementation of MM = 116, stable motion of eight-note arpeggios and proportional arrangement of irregular ornaments in the melody (mm. 2–3) with 11 and 22 eighth-notes. It was supplemented with a graphical representation of melodic range spectrogram created by Sonic Visualiser 2.5. (Cannam, Landone

⁴ I have collected some more recordings as well, but they were not included in the current study and their examination will be developed in future: Andrea Rollo (1); Chaplin, François (1); d'Ascoli, Bernard (1); De May, Stéphane (1); Feltsman, Vladimir (2); François, Samson (1); Hewitt, Angela (1); Hobson, Ian (1); Jelasic, James (1); Katz, Amir (1); Lust, Eliane (1); Margalit, Israella (1); Nissman, Barbara (1); Perrotta, Maria live 2014 (release Decca 2015); Reisenberg, Nadia (1); Rév, Livia (1); Schmalfuss, Peter (1); Schoonderwoerd, Arthur (1, piano Pleyel 1836); Shebanova, Tatiana (1); Simon, Abbey (1); Smeterlin, Jan (1); Stott, Kathryn (1); Toyama, Keiko (1); Van Oort, Bart (1, piano Pleyel 1842); Wehr, David Allen (1); Wild, Earl (3).

& Sandler, 2010) (see Fig. 3). The estimated length of orderly performance of mm. 1–4 is 12.407”, while the total duration of Nocturne performed by computer is 4’25.709”. Figure 3 includes a fragment of the score, the scheme of quarter- and eighth-note sequences, and the melodic range spectrogram.

In the first step of analysis, the first phrase in Chopin’s Nocturne (mm. 1–4, a traditional tonally closed period of two two-bar melodically and harmonically parallel phrases) was extracted from the total sound recording. Already here we encounter different approaches and style of piano playing. Afterwards, the quantitative assessment was applied and the extracts were grouped, gradually moving from pretty strict playing to a very free tempo and rhythm, which affected the manifestation of tempo from live to extremely slow motion.

In an attempt to make a classification of these recordings, I chose some criteria for my analysis. The main focus was on the stability or non-stability of tempo and rhythm. So I evaluated and compared such elements as:

- duration;
- tempo (from pretty fast to slower motion);
- relief of overall motion (from rhythmic stability to fluctuations, and from even motion to run-up);
- harmony/vertical of the score (i.e. the coincidence between right and left hands, do they match strictly or not);
- an especially important element—the upbeat and the approach to it (e.g. does the pianist play the eighth notes strictly or in a flexible and uneven rhythm?).

In this way I tried to select and group the recordings as they gradually moved from a rather strict play to a very free tempo and rhythm, from a normal and live tempo to extremely slow motion. The evaluation of musical fragments allowed me to assign the particular pianists to each of four types, referring to the so-called square of opposition. Therefore, four types were distinguished, where No. 1 and No. 4 are absolutely opposite, with a high contrast of playing speed that shows a gradual change in how slow the tempo becomes and more and more mismatches in the metric vertical. I arranged and placed the pianists of each type in the table according to the elongation of the first four bars. Obviously, the comparison of music fragments shows that the manifestation of more and more *rubato* determines a consistent deceleration and slowing down of tempo. But the order of placing the particular performance and pianist was decided not only after the tempo indicator; attention was paid to the stability or fluctuation, how the upbeat is performed, whether it a typical run-up, and so on.

The first type of performances is characterized by pretty orderly playing, stable tempo and equal motion of the accompaniment (eighth-notes in the left hand). The vertical of accompaniment and melody shows rather strict metrical coincidences. In total, three pianists/recordings were placed in this group: Falvay, Godowsky, and Novaes. Usually, the analyzed examples are united by live tempo, and the length of performance of mm. 1–4 ranges from 13.545” to 16.090”.

The second type: a slight manifestation of *rubato* features. Enough live tempo and pretty strict pulse for the accompaniment; manipulation of minor acceleration and slowing down, especially inside the melodic ornaments of 11 and 22 notes; some recordings keep the strict pulse of the melodic phrase of 6 eighth-notes in the upbeat, whereas others tend to expose the upbeat (performed slightly slower and with more freedom, like the run-up); slight deviations in the match of the vertical; the second phrase (mm. 3–4) is performed more freely. Fifteen pianists/sixteen recordings: Rubinstein, Barenboim, Biret, Dang Thai Son, Freire, Kapell, Li Yundi (1, 2), Moravec, Ohlsson, Pollini, Sheng Cai, Sztompka, Ts’ong, and Varsi. The length of

mm. 1–4 is dominated by 14–15”. However, an equal motion, strict vertical, and pretty stable rhythm is specific for extremely lengthy interpretation by Nikita Magaloff, lasting 20.204”.

The third type: expression of “dreamy” *rubato*. A prominence of the accelerated or spaced-out upbeat; a tendency to listen attentively to the melodic relief; rather slow tempo; acceleration and slowing down inside the pulse of eighths. Eleven pianists/fifteen recordings: Arrau, Ashkenazy, Cziffra, Chaimovich (1, 2), Engerer (all three examples), Harasiewicz, Joao Pires, Li Yundi (3, 4), Richter (2), Thibaudet, and Tiempo. The length of mm. 1–4 ranges from 14.237” to 18.662”.

The fourth type: a turn towards the narrative nature of sound; maximally attentive listening and performance of each note that determines a very slow tempo; most often the vertical coincides in the beginning of bars only (the inside of bars is emphasized with rhythmical irregularity); every performance is individual. Seven pianists/ten recordings: Chaimovich (3), Gavrilov (all three examples), Pacini, Richter (1), Sombart, and Tipo. The length of mm. 1–4 ranges from 17.573” to 23.554”, dominated length over 20”.

4. Individual cases

A separate approach to several recordings was implemented and it was kept in mind that some pianists, such as Richter, Yundi Li, Brigitte Engerer, Vadim Chaimovich, and Gavrilov, have performed and recorded this piece of music several times. It is an intriguing focus to follow how the same artist renders the same musical score in the distance of time, even in the range of twenty years. Listening to the recordings allowed me to distinguish three different types of personalities.

It may be noticed that Yundi Li, Brigitte Engerer, Vadim Chaimovich, and Andrei Gavrilov remain faithful to their conception, to the manner of performance, be it live or studio performance. Yundi Li is a typical representative of a stable position and predictable performance because in all four recordings we face the same delay in the upbeat.

As for Chaimovich and Gavrilov—these two personalities follow their own attitude, which may be characterized as unpredictable. When we listen to the three performances of each artist, every time we hear a different implementation of the Nocturne. All interpretations may be characterized as highly individual, narrative, with a slow tempo, and with great attention paid to every sound. However, this kind of unpredictability is a constant and general feature, that is, we expect and may predict that these two pianists will read the same music score differently, in a new manner.

Sviatoslav Richter stands out separately with his two extreme approaches. In his 1950s interpretation, the pianist provided a very slow, eloquent, and philosophical interpretation, a very vivid sensation of narrativeness. This interpretation was placed in the fourth group and is close to Gavrilov’s and Sombart’s records. After 22 years Richter performed the same Nocturne quite differently, a little faster and closer to classical *rubato*. In this way, Richter may be listed as an unpredictable performer (in the case of this Nocturne).

5. Conclusion

The main observation after examining the recordings highlights the manifestation of *rubato* closely related to the moderation of movement: the tendency towards the expressiveness of sound, an attempt to highlight every eight-note (as if sung) slows down the tempo. On the other hand, tempo deceleration is directly connected to the disagreement in the vertical between melody and accompaniment.

As expected, the interpretations placed in groups 2 and 3, constitute the major part of the recordings. The length of interpretation and choice of narrative approach (specific for group 4) does not depend on the age of the performer or the date of the record. However, the most ordinary performances in the first group are represented particularly by pianists of the old generation (Leopold Godowsky and Guiomar Novaes). In most cases, the total duration of Nocturne is possible to predict according to the way of interpretation in mm. 1–4 (Pacini’s performance displays unpredictable proportion: the lengthy period and narrative playing in mm. 1–4 lasts over 19”; however the total duration of the piano piece is of an ordinary length 5’20”).

In the range of 42 interpretations, only a few pianists are close to the original tempo and duration, for example, Ts’ong, Ohlsson, Godowsky, and Varsi (see Table 2). After comparing Varsi’s interpretation to Alfred Cortot’s (1877–1962) notes in his 1945 edition of Nocturne Op. 9 No. 1, indicating the tempo mark 116 and total duration of Nocturne 4’30”, the Uruguayan pianist Dinorah Varsi (1939–2013) is quite close to the original conception of the Nocturne tempo. As is known, Cortot was highly influential for his poetic interpretations of piano pieces by Chopin and Schumann. Cortot studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Chopin’s student Emile Decombes. Respectively, Dinorah Varsi studied under Sarah Bourdillon, a pupil at Alfred Cortot’s Ecole Normale de Musique. Therefore, Varsi’s interpretation of Chopin’s Nocturne may be regarded a possible legacy of Cortot’s and respectively Chopin’s conception.

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