

"Stolen Time: The History of Tempo Rubato." By Richard Hudson.

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Book Reviews

Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time: the History of Tempo Rubato*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. xv, 473pp. ISBN 0-19-816169-7

Rubato has received scant attention in studies of performance practice. While attention has been devoted to limited aspects, Richard Hudson's book is the first to deal with the subject in comprehensive fashion, and it is a most impressive study.

One reason for the neglect of the device is its elusiveness. Definitions generally give conflicting impressions of how it should be interpreted, even when marked, and it was marked relatively infrequently in the music of most composers until recently. Even now the word is hardly in consistent use. Actually, Professor Hudson provides evidence that some composers attempted to notate literally the sort of rubato they had in mind, only to abandon the effort when it did not produce the intended result. When written into the score, the term may apply to a specific passage, the duration of which may be indicated in some way but more often is not. It may be associated with the word *tempo* or with some term of expression. Some composers, notably Bartók, often included the word in a tempo marking. Context and composers' own performances often suggest that the word may be understood in a variety of ways. And since the effect is often considered to be at the discretion of performers, an attempt to deal with it in systematic and rigorous fashion may seem doomed to failure. Professor Hudson shows that this is not the case.

In the minds of many, rubato became a prominent feature of performance only during the 19th century. Indeed, in the sense of expressive tempo fluctuation it did achieve widespread use at about the middle of the Romantic period. Hudson calls this type "later rubato." Less well known is the fact that a very different effect was in use before that time, one that was discussed by a number of writers. This entailed the maintenance of even tempo in the accompaniment while the melody proceeds more freely, anticipating the beat or lagging behind it by some indeterminate time interval, so that melody and accompaniment are temporarily unsynchronized. For classically trained musicians this practice is likely to seem quite unnatural

and extremely difficult to achieve. In fact, it is quite commonly in use today among popular musicians, of whom Frank Sinatra is a prime example. It was also the type of rubato apparently preferred by most musicians of the 18th and early 19th centuries, Mozart and Chopin, for example. This type Professor Hudson designates as "earlier rubato."

The word rubato, with the implication of "robbery" (e.g. taking time from one note and giving it to another, thus anticipating or delaying beyond the beat or prolonging a stressed note at the expense of a following one) entered the musical vocabulary in Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723). However, both types had antecedents long before that time. "Later rubato" is seen in the letters denoting rhythmic nuances sometimes found in early Gregorian chant manuscripts; in the later Italian madrigal, monody, and recitative; in cadenzas; and in the various preludial forms (including *fantasia*, *ricercar*, *toccata*, *capriccio*, etc.). Parallels to "earlier rubato" are seen in various types of melodic variation as early as the Robertsbridge Codex from ca. 1320; in ornaments (*appoggiatura*, *port de voix*, trill), especially the French *suspension*, and inequality. It was often invoked during the baroque as an aid to pronunciation in vocal music. A similar idea is evident in various kinds of rhythmic transformation, from rhythmicized chants used as Notre Dame clausulae and motet tenors, to Renaissance dances, to thematic transformation in the instrumental canzona, etc. In light of these antecedents, one wonders whether terms more descriptive of the effect rather than the chronology might be more appropriate.

"Earlier rubato" is first described in solo vocal music, later in violin music, later yet in piano music. It was long regarded as peculiarly a soloist's device, only much later finding a place in orchestral music and opera. Though the word first appeared in Tosi's treatise on vocal music in 1723, Roger North had described Tosi's performances in the 1690s and gave some notated examples of his practices. Soon others advocated it as well (John Ernest Galliard) as a means of achieving vocal declamation and as an adjunct to ornamenting a melodic line. The device is in evidence in contemporary descriptions of singers of the day, notably that of Francesca Cuzzoni, by Burney. Burney, like many writers of the Classical period, was much influenced by Quantz, who introduced the phrase *tempo rubato*. Examples in his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* were echoed in many vocal treatises of the time (Agricola, Hiller, Corri, etc.). Among Romantic writers Manuel

Patricio Rodrigues García gave the most sensitive, knowledgeable, and comprehensive descriptions, quoting examples by Mozart, Donizetti, Rossini, Bellini, and Cimarosa. Rubato was generally associated with particularly poignant text expression.

On the model of vocal music, "earlier rubato" soon found a place in violin music. An early exponent was Franz Benda, who sometimes marked the word in his music, usually accompanying irregular note groupings (e.g. ten eighth notes in the time of six quarters in the bass). Particularly cogent descriptions of the device by Paganini, Baillot, and Spohr leave no doubt that anticipation and delay or prolongation by the soloist against a steady accompaniment were meant, for purposes of intensification of an important note. Usually it is not notated but is left to the discretion of the soloist.

Adaptation of "earlier rubato" to keyboard instruments introduced new complications. So long as the keyboardist served only as an accompanist, his duty was simply to keep steady time. But solo keyboard music combining both melody and accompaniment functions imposes entirely new problems: great independence of the hand is required. In a 1777 letter Mozart alluded to the difficulty many performers faced:

What . . . people cannot grasp is that in *tempo rubato* in an Adagio, the left hand should go on playing in strict time. With them the left hand always follows suit.

Because of the difficulty, the device was treated somewhat differently and took on new meanings, at least temporarily. For Marpurg, for instance, it was a compositional device, such as written syncopation, anticipation, or delay, not a method of delivery by the performer. Once the device is understood in this way it becomes obvious that it had been in use for some time, in aria movements of J.S. Bach, for instance. One wonders to what extent precise note values were intended in such instances. Türk made the link to vocal rubato as advocated by Tosi and Galliard. He saw it as a flexible rhythmic relationship between melody and accompaniment, most effective when used sparingly. Generally it is specified by the composer.

During the latter 18th century other types of rubato briefly made their appearance. More importantly, "later rubato," tempo flexibility for expressive effect, appears, first in Christian Kalkbrenner's *Theorie der Tonkunst* (1789). It is often used more or less

interchangeably with terms denoting tempo modification (e.g., *adagio*, *ritardando*, *rallentando*, *smorzando*, etc.). This understanding was inextricably connected with emerging Romanticism, and it was not long before its excessive use by performers became cause for complaint. In the attempt to control its use many composers tried to notate it in a variety of ways, some of them not immediately obvious as manifestations of rubato.

Perhaps no composer's music has been so closely associated with rubato as that of Chopin, often with results utterly different from what he had in mind. Contemporary discussions of his playing stress the finesse with which he played, his touch, use of pedals, and expressive rubato. It is generally noted that he was careful to maintain steady rhythm in the accompaniment, though the right hand might be more flexible. It is recorded that his performance of mazurkas could quite convincingly be counted in four, although he always left the impression of triple meter. In notating his music he was meticulous and judicious in indicating expression markings, including the word rubato. He did, for example, distinguish between *ritenuto* and *ritardando*, both often reduced to *rit.* in subsequent editions. Even more subtly, he aligned the two hands in non-standard ways to show where the right hand should lag behind the left, clearly "earlier rubato." Needless to say, such refinements are quite lacking from most editions. Recorded performances of his works generally include copious amounts of "later rubato," but at just those spots where Chopin used the word rubato there is usually no special effect. Clearly we have much to learn about Chopin performance.

Chopin had some influence through his students and performances, but he seems to have been the last of those whose use of rubato was principally of the earlier variety. One of those subjected to his influence, as least for a time, was Liszt, who greatly admired Chopin's rubato and incorporated it into his own playing as one of several possibilities. According to Czerny, writing around 1839, Liszt's playing involved "the very frequent application of each kind of *tempo rubato*." His understanding of the term seems to have had various dimensions and to have changed over time. Curiously, he seems not to have associated it with applications that might be expected. In his works involving gypsy style, for instance, in which tempo fluctuation is a given, he never used the term; nor did he employ it in his book on gypsy music. A characteristic practice seems to have been the sudden suspension or modification of the tempo.

Some of the early works in which he specified it he later revised substituting other terms. He seems to have been particularly lavish in its use during his years as a traveling virtuoso (1837-1849), later recommending to his students that they be more circumspect. In some works he appears to have used Chopin's variety of stable-tempo rubato, but it simply could not be applied where the accompaniment fails to provide a basis for steady rhythm, as in recitative passages, or where an arpeggiated accompaniment figure begins after the beat. Around 1850 he composed works with titles associated with Chopin (*polonaise, berceuse, mazurka, and ballade*), specifying rubato in much the way that composer would have used it. A radical new departure occurs after 1853, when he introduced the term for the first time into orchestral works.

Liszt's extensive activity as pianist, composer, teacher, author, editor, and conductor, as well as his dynamic personality, made him the most influential figure on subsequent generations. One who fell under his sway was Tchaikovsky, who used the term rubato in a variety of works, including piano, orchestral, and chamber music and operas, often in main tempo markings. When used within a work, it occurs at moments of strong emotion. It seems odd that Wagner did not follow Liszt's model, but he is not known ever to have specified rubato. However, as a conductor he freely used variation in tempo for expressive purposes, but also for structural ones.

Given Debussy's penchant for precise notation, it should not be surprising that he specified rubato more frequently than any earlier composer. For him it refers to flexibility of tempo within a basically stable tempo and for a carefully defined block of time. It contrasts with *tempo giusto*, indicating relatively strict tempo.

The 20th century has produced many kinds of rubato, ranging from the continuing 19th-century tradition reflected in Schoenberg and Berg to very different conceptions of it, as for instance in music of Bartók and Stravinsky. Bartók, along with his colleague Kodály, was much influenced by his work in eastern European folk music, which involves a *parlando-rubato* designed to facilitate expressive delivery of the words. Similar effects are often called for in his music, whether instrumental or vocal. Frequently it is used as a means of achieving contrast when a section is repeated. From Bartók's own recordings it can be seen that his renditions could differ widely, as, for instance, in repeated sections.

Given Stravinsky's avowed intent to reverse the rhythmic excesses of Romanticism, it is somewhat surprising to find that he specified rubato fairly frequently. In his earliest and latest periods he seems to have taken a more relaxed approach to tempo strictness, while during his neo-classic period he made a determined effort to control every aspect of his music, making "interpretation" unnecessary. What can be seen as a kind of rubato is used, for instance, to effect thematic transformation. When he marked the word rubato, it appears within the context of strict tempo and seems to denote special articulation and voice quality. Often it is used for declamatory or structural purposes. However much he decried unregulated rhythmic flexibility, his recorded performances show that he performed rubatos with a freedom that he condemned in others.

"Earlier rubato" has made its reappearance in much 20th-century music, especially American. Without always making a connection with earlier practice, Virgil Thompson, Percy Scholes, Henry Pleasants, and others describe the practice with great clarity, particularly in reference to American popular music. The device is also called for in such compositions as Copland's *Tender Land*, where the timpani and piano are instructed to "continue in tempo without regard to the conductor's beat" or to the rubato of the melody. Rubato necessarily plays a role in the various types of rhythmic experimentation practiced by Elliott Carter, Lucas Foss, and others.

I have attempted here to summarize some of the main points of the book in the hope of piquing the curiosity of the reader to explore it in detail. It is a work of extraordinary richness, brilliantly researched, and well written. For his elusive topic the author has found documentation of many kinds: books on performance and related matters; descriptions in letters, diaries, reviews, and other writings; recordings of noted performers, especially the earliest to be recorded; and compositions in which the device of rubato is noted or in some way implied, often in several versions. His evidence is interpreted with scholarly and musical sensitivity. There is much more to reward a careful reading.

In closing, I must offer one complaint concerning the production of the book. Photographic reproductions are given in abundance, with extensive reference in the text of such nature that it is essential that the plates be readable if their purpose is to be realized. They are by no means merely decorative. Regrettably, they are reduced to such a degree that some are hardly legible. The worst cases are those

where two facing octavo pages appear side by side occupying only the top half of one of the book's pages, which are probably of smaller size than the originals. At the very least they could have been given an entire page in landscape format, but separate complete facing pages would have been better yet.

This cavil aside, one can only applaud Professor Hudson's accomplishment and recommend his book highly. It belongs in every music library and on the shelf of every serious performer.

BARTON HUDSON