

***Rubato* for the Bassoonist**

With examples from Milde *Concert Study* #5¹

Barrick Stees

While violinists and flutists play melodic material, the bassoonist's lot in life is to enjoy only occasional opportunities for expressive solo playing while developing skills as the orchestra's "utility" player. For the bassoonist, playing bass lines and accompanying figures with technical accuracy, harmonic interest, good rhythm, solid intonation and a focused sound take up much more time and energy in rehearsal and performance than playing solos. In addition, the study of the bassoon involves extra time solving technical problems and dealing with mechanical difficulties such as reed making and instrument maintenance not encountered by most other musicians.

This situation leaves less time for the study of the infrequent, but marvelous solos in the orchestral repertoire than that afforded other instrumentalists. It can produce bassoonists who are adept at solving technical problems, but have trouble matching the expressive capabilities of their colleagues when called upon to do so.

This lack can be especially glaring when the bassoonist must play a solo previously played by another instrumentalist or when another performer elaborates on a solo first played by the bassoonist. It is natural for the audience, conductor and other performers to make a comparison and no one wants to come up short in this friendly competition.

The second movements of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade* and Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* are good examples of this type of composition. The performance of the *Sheherazade* bassoon solo must set the standard for the other solos that follow. The Tchaikovsky solo should complement the expression and phrasing of the oboe solo at the beginning of the movement.

One of the challenges a bassoonist encounters in these solos comes in playing with an appropriate sense of *rubato*. The *Sheherazade* solo is extremely boring without some *rubato*. The Tchaikovsky can sound mechanical and cold without *rubato* (though mostly in the second phrase). Therefore, it is imperative that the bassoonist learn to play with a *rubato* as sophisticated as that of any other instrumentalist.

The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines *rubato* as, “An elastic, flexible tempo involving slight *accelerandos* and *ritardandos* that alternate according to the requirements of musical expression.”² The Dictionary entry differentiates between two types of *rubato*; the first in which *rubato* exists only in the melody, and the second in which the whole musical structure ebbs and flows in time. The Dictionary states that, like jazz musicians, Leopold Mozart and Chopin are among the wide variety of musicians that applied *rubato* to the melody only, keeping the accompaniment steady. There is controversy about applying only this type of *rubato* to Chopin, but his free, virtuosic writing for the right hand may be what is meant here.

Beginning in the 19th century, chamber ensembles and orchestras began applying *rubato* to the complete musical structure. With the help of a conductor, orchestras could perform *rubato* with the kind of sensitivity more easily attained by one or two performers.

It also mentions a specific *rubato* practice, “. . . *accelerandos* and *ritardandos* must complement one another, so that, after six or seven measures in free tempo, the player arrives at exactly the same moment in time that he would have reached had he played in rigid tempo.”³

While the number of measures specified in the above quotation is perhaps arbitrary, this method of performing *rubato* gives an equilibrium and poise to the section chosen for *rubato*.

This was the way that my teacher, K. David VanHoesen, taught *rubato*. He often used the metronome to measure the amount of ebb and flow reached during the *accelerandos* and *ritardandos* in the playing. He encouraged us to “play against the metronome,” always returning to its beat at strategic points in the measure or phrase.

***Rubato* Dos and Don'ts**

Dos

- Learn the piece in steady rhythm first, noting where *rubato* might help make the phrase come alive. The bassoonist must have mastery of the pulse and technique of the piece before adding *rubato*.
- Use the metronome to measure the amount and length of *rubato* used in any passage.

- Use your knowledge of the style, period, tempo and expression of the piece to guide the amount of *rubato* you use. Use very little for an *Allegro* by Mozart, quite a bit for a slow *Milde Concert Study*.
- Try the “Laugh Factor.” To judge if a musical line has an appropriate sense of *rubato*, see if a slight exaggeration of the *rubato* provokes your laughter. If so, perhaps *rubato* should not be used here or used only sparingly.

Don'ts

Don't use *rubato* in a particular passage because:

- “It felt right.”
- “They do it that way on the recording.”
- “My teacher said to.”

Milde Concert Study #5

The *Milde Concert Studies* provide many challenges for the bassoonist. One of the most important decisions in interpreting them is when and how to use *rubato*. For this music written in the Romantic style, the use of *rubato* is often necessary – especially in the slow etudes – in order for the flavor of the music to come alive.

Since *rubato* is used most extensively in Romantic era music, the study of other music from that time is helpful. By listening to historic recordings of pianists and violinists such as Rachmaninov or Kreisler, the bassoonist can get an impression of how *rubato* was executed by performers steeped in the Romantic style. While the amount of freedom these artists took may seem excessive by today's standards, it is liberating to know that freedom with tempo was expected and appropriate. After some listening and study, certain patterns emerge.

Some make the argument that *rubato* should be spontaneous. They bristle at the thought of planning it out. *Rubato* should sound spontaneous, but, like a great actor, the performer must work out every detail in advance to give the impression of ease and grace in performance. This

is what makes a performance sound spontaneous. I like George Szell's famous dictum, "The music must sound completely spontaneous – however – as a result of meticulous planning."

Planning involves analysis. Below I have chosen four parameters that can be used to evaluate where *rubato* should be used: harmony, rhythm, pulse and line contour.

Using Milde's *Concert Study #5* I have listed some commonly accepted places for *rubato* in the piece. A judicious choice of some, but not all of these will result in a nuanced interpretation. For instance, below I give four possible choices for *rubato* in measures 17-19 in the Milde.

Choosing just one may be sufficient in performance. Indeed, overuse of *rubato* is just as bad a fault as not using any at all. Instead of enhancing expression, overuse can give the impression that the performer lacks a steady pulse.

I. HARMONY

Taking time to stress harmonic dissonance in a line is a common and effective use of *rubato*.

A. Non-Harmonic Tones

1. Passing Tones

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 6/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Larghetto' and the dynamics 'p'. The first measure is labeled 'i b minor' and contains a half note G2, a half note A2, and a half note B2. The second measure is labeled 'iv e minor' and contains a half note C3, a half note D3, a half note E3, and a half note F3. A circled note in the second measure, the D3, is labeled 'P.T.' (Passing Tone). A slur covers the notes in the second measure.

2. Appoggiature

3

app.

F#7 V7

3. Suspensions

4

sus.

i b minor

f

4. Lower neighbor/Upper neighbor

Stressing one or some of the upper or lower neighbors in this sequence adds expression to the line.

11

LN UN

LN UN

LN UN

f# minor

f

B. Chord Progressions

Understanding the tension and release inherent in chord progressions can reveal places in the phrase for *rubato*.

V relaxes into I (tension relaxes with slowing of the pulse)



Intense IV chord (tension increases with the quickening of the pulse)



II. RHYTHM

A. Strong beat/Weak beat

When choosing between two non-harmonic tones for *rubato*, stressing the strong beat is usually the better choice.



B. Patterns/Sequences (rhythmic continuity)

Rubato can help create interest in long passages with unchanging rhythm. A flexible pulse gives a spontaneous, improvisatory feel to a rhythmically monotonous line.



C. Faster rhythmic values leading to climax

Speeding up during the fastest values enhances a rhythmic crescendo.



III. PULSE

A. Give back what you take or “playing against the metronome”



B. Sequence/Repetition speeds up

Speeding up after beginning a sequence creates more interest in the line.



C. Broaden at climax



D. Slow at cadence



IV. LINE CONTOUR

“Turn arounds” or the topmost or lowest note in a line are places for *rubato*. The turn around can be either restful or intense.

A. Turn arounds – up



B. Turn arounds – down



C. Interior groupings

A subtle use of *rubato* in the two note groups can bring out the interior structure of the line.



D. Large intervals

Large intervals can be the most expressive intervals in the line and often need more time to develop properly.



The examples listed above illustrate choices the performer can make when using *rubato*. The four parameters for *rubato* – harmony, rhythm, pulse and line contour – represent aspects of music that are enhanced by the use of *rubato*.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to use *rubato* is to make the music less mechanical, make it sing, make it come alive. While this may point to a more intuitive, less studied approach, the fact remains that the classical performer is mainly a re-creator and not an improviser of the score. A successful performance is one that is unique and captivating yet does justice to the composer and the score. Therefore, the ability to analyze, explain and even defend an interpretive choice is important. Indeed, in ensemble music it is often necessary to defend an interpretation when challenged by a colleague.

My ideas about *rubato* come from years of study, listening, practice and performance. However, they are just my way of looking at music. One of the defining aspects of a great piece of music is that it can withstand many different interpretations. It is my hope that these thoughts will stimulate others to deeper analysis and greater boldness in performance.

Further reading:

Sound in Motion; A Performer's Guide to Greater Musical Expression by David McGill, Indiana University Press.

Casals and the Art of Interpretation by David Blum, University of California Press.

Listening:

When listening, use headphones or earbuds and follow along with the score to pick up nuances.

Using the metronome or pulsing with your hand is a good method for determining how the *rubato* is used in a phrase. Here are just two examples for study:

Schumann: *Träumerei*. Vladimir Horowitz, Sony. Studying a simple and repetitive piece like *Träumerei* can help focus on the nuances in a performer's *rubato*. In this recording, Horowitz makes each phrase unique without distortion through his use of *rubato*.

Beethoven: *The Five Piano Concertos*. Leon Fleischer/Szell/Cleveland Orchestra, Sony. Great performance throughout, but Fleischer is especially good in the pacing of *rubato* in the cadenzas. He provides good examples of how to use *rubato* in free passages.

1 All excerpts from Ludwig Milde *Concert Study #5* for this article come from the Friedrich Hofmeister edition. The Cundy-Bettoney edition is exactly the same and more readily available, however.

2 Willi Appel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 742.

3 Ibid.