

On Teaching

by Gavin Black



Boëllmann *Suite Gothique*, Part 2: First movement

This month's column looks at the first movement—*Introduction-Choral*—of the *Suite Gothique*. In the main, we will outline an approach to practicing the movement, starting of course with working out fingerings and pedalings. We will also consider some interpretive questions, mainly as they interact with or affect choices that must be made about fingering and pedaling.

Several technical features of this movement immediately stand out:

- Many thick chords in the hands—both hands;
- Double pedal for several measures;
- Except for the double pedal passages, the pedal part is strikingly low in compass, with the E-flat in the middle of the pedal keyboard as the highest note;
- Very little indication for swell pedal use;
- The hands sometimes more or less double each other in octaves;
- Conceptually each hand seems to be more of its own part than is usually true in a contrapuntal piece, where voices often wander from hand to hand—however, that does not mean that the hands cannot help each other out a bit;
- Very few chords do not include raised notes;
- There are no explicit instructions from the composer about articulation or phrasing, except for commas in three places, and one important slur, with its repeat.

Articulation

The thick chords raise one important technical issue right away, namely the matter of fingering in relation to articulation. It is essentially always easier—more natural as to hand position—to play successive chords of three or more notes non-legato. Sometimes it is actually impossible to do otherwise, more so the more notes there are in the chords, of course, but also depending on other matters, such as the placement within chords of raised notes. However, in a typical passage made up of successive chords, there are almost always some that can be played legato fairly easily, others that can be played legato with some sort of extra effort, and some that really cannot be played legato at all. This is of course different, around the margins at least, for different players, with hands of different sizes.

In music that we believe to be basically non-legato in overall style, none of this presents particular problems. Chord fingerings can be chosen based largely on the comfort of each chord—in turn based mostly on hand position—and the non-legato transition from one chord to the next can be practiced until it is, while non-legato, still smooth and *cantabile*, if that is what is desired. In a piece or a passage that we want to play legato, we must grapple with finding the best way to make connections between chords when it is not easy to do so. (By contrast, it is, from a technical point of view, almost trivially easy to play at least most of the upper voice melody in the third movement—*Prière*—legato, as per the

marked phrases. The fingers of the right hand are simply available to do so.)

The question of whether this movement is *meant* to be legato, or the question of whether a given player *wants* or *prefers* to play it legato is unclear, or, more accurately, it is one that different students, teachers, and players will answer differently from one another (and from me). I am not interested in prejudging questions like this—that is, I want to try as best I can to leave all sorts of interpretive possibilities open as we consider how to work on the pieces under discussion. Also, there is a close relationship in a piece like this between articulation and room acoustics. In a very resonant room, a thick texture will come across as essentially legato even if the fingers and feet put small spaces between the notes and chords. If the player literally connects notes and chords, then there is a chance that the result will be enough beyond legato to sound unintelligible. This is an important consideration, especially since most organ repertoire, certainly including the pieces of Boëllmann, was written to be played in very resonant rooms. Of course, we must play in the rooms that are available to us.

Fingering

A fingering for the chords of the opening, in the right hand, that is designed to be comfortable, accepting that most of the chords will be non-legato, might

Example 1



Example 3



look like Example 1. This happens to suit my hands. For another player, the best fingering might be a little bit different. In m. 5, for example, some players would rather do this (Example 2):

Example 2



To achieve more full legato, substitution might be used, especially, for example, in the second and sixth measures (Example 3). (I find this fingering awk-

ward, but possible with practice.)

A player with large hands might be able to do this (Example 4),

Example 4



releasing the lower two notes of the opening chord early, but joining the upper two notes to the notes of the second chord. (I cannot quite do this one. Don't

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Example 5



try it unless it is really comfortable. The stretch could cause injury.)

In the passage at m. 13 (Example 5), the left hand can take some of the notes printed on the upper staff. I have put boxes around a few that I think make sense treated this way, although there are others that are possible. The decision to do this would make it easier to play the upper notes of the right-hand part legato, at the expense of some legato in the inner voices. This is an artistic judgment call, but notice the slurs in m. 18 and later its echo in m. 25. These are the only slurs in the entire movement, and are probably an important part of the rhetoric of this phrase.

Any student must make decisions and choices about fingering matters such as these, perhaps in consultation with a teacher. There are two important technical practicing points to make about some of these fingerings. First, non-legato fingerings will end up sounding smoother and most natural the more they are practiced, at first, with large rather than small breaks between the notes. That is, a gesture such as this (where the asterisks are) (Example 6),

Example 6



should be practiced with the A-flat/E-flat/C chord released almost as soon as it is played (but released gently), so that the motion to the next (B-flat/F/D) chord is as easy as possible. Then it will also be easy, later in the practicing process, to close that gap and make the articulation very small and unobtrusive. If you try to make the articulation too small from the beginning—waiting until the last instant and then quickly moving to, almost lunging at, the next chord—then it is likely to end up sounding awkward and stiff, no matter how much you practice it.

Second, it is important to remember to use the correct order in any fingering that includes multiple substitutions.

For example, in this triple substitution (Example 7),

Example 7



it is necessary to execute the substitutions from the lowest to the highest: 2-1, then 3-2, then 5-4. In every case, it is important to carry out substitutions in such a way that the hand moves inward—becomes smaller—rather than moving outward and stretching out. This can always be worked out by trial and error, and getting it right can make the difference between a substitution's being impossible and its being easy.

Pedaling

One advantage of double pedal is that it resolves any doubt as to which foot should play which note. In effect there are two pedal lines—in the case of the first four measures of this piece, identical to one another except for being an octave apart—and each line has to be executed by one foot. An approach to pedal playing that involves paying attention to the position of each foot with respect to itself (as outlined in my earlier columns on pedal playing) not just, or mainly, in relation to the other foot, tends to make double pedal passages not seem as different from “regular” pedal as they might otherwise. In the case of this passage, as with the manual part, there is a relationship between pedaling and articulation. If this were a line from a Buxtehude piece (which it, unlike the manual part, could just as well be) then any comfortable pedaling would be fine: perhaps all toe, perhaps some heels when the angle was such as to make that comfortable. If, in keeping with an overall interpretive approach, we want to play this line legato, then a pedaling like this for the right foot part might work (Example 8).

The two quarter notes could be played by rolling the toe area of the foot, that is, playing the B-flat with the outside of

Example 8



Example 9



Example 10



the foot and the A-flat with the inside. The first note (G) of the second measure could be played with the toe, creating what should be a small articulation before that note. I might also play the first note of the passage with the toe initially, to make a clean, crisp beginning easier to achieve, before substituting the heel to prepare for the next note. There are other possible variations. The left foot could well use exactly the same pedaling as the right.

For the non-double segments of the pedal line, different players will choose different pedalings based largely on personal preference. Here are two different pedalings for mm. 5-8 (Examples 9 and 10); and of course there are other possibilities.

Practicing

The most efficient procedure for practicing this movement is the same as for almost any piece: work out fingerings and pedalings; divide the piece into manageable sections (in this piece, it makes sense to work with the phrases suggested by commas and by fermatas, although it is certainly fine to subdivide those units into smaller ones); practice these sections with separate hands and feet, very slowly; put hands together, or hands and feet together, only when the separate components are very well learned; increase tempo only when a given tempo has become almost trivially easy. This procedure can never be mentioned too often, and it can never be stressed enough that, if it is followed thoroughly and patiently, it always works.

In the case of this movement, I would strongly suggest that at every stage of working on the piece, until it is really ready to go at approximately the composer's suggested tempo of half note equals 50, the beat in the student's head, or coming from the student's metronome, be equal to an eighth note. The quarter note will be too slow to be followed easily until close to a performance tempo.

Special procedures

In the case of this movement, there are a few special procedures that can enhance

the learning of the piece—that is, getting to know it musically—while the notes are being learned securely. These are analogous to the practicing of separate voices in a contrapuntal piece, but modified to reflect the texture and structure of this piece: one in which the melody—the top voice—is indeed musically the most important thing, and in which the interaction between that melody and the bass line is the main source of motion.

So the first special practice technique is simply to **play the melody and the bass line together**, omitting all of the other voices or chordal notes. This can be done with the bass line in the pedal—as soon as the pedal is well enough learned—or with the bass line in the left hand, read from the pedal line or extracted from the left hand part of the manuals-only phrases. It can also be done with the melody in the left hand—since the left hand often doubles the melody—and the bass in the pedal. This can be done before the fingering of the chords has been practiced and made comfortable, since the extracted individual lines are fairly easy to play. But I would also suggest continuing to do it at later stages of work on the piece as a listening exercise and a way of keeping focused on the architecture of the piece, rather than just the complexities of learning it.

In the passages in which the left hand doubles the right hand an octave lower (this is a slightly oversimplified description of the texture), it is difficult for the ears of the performer to follow the left-hand part. The higher sounds of the right-hand part predominate. And, although the left hand in these passages is in a meaningful sense somewhat subordinate to the right hand, the overall texture will benefit from the left hand's being played in as interesting and nuanced a way as the right hand, and from the two hands really being in sync. One way to work on this is to **play the two hands together—once they have been practiced and are secure!—on different keyboards, with the left hand significantly louder**. The right hand should be almost but not quite actually drowned out. Of course this only applies to some

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