

## On Teaching

by Gavin Black



### Boëllmann *Suite Gothique*, Part 5: *Toccata*

In this month's column we look at some aspects of the fourth and last movement of Boëllmann's *Suite Gothique*, the *Toccata*. This is the last column in this series to deal in detail with a specific movement. Next month's column will wrap up the yearlong series with a discussion of some general points.

The *Toccata* is probably the best-known and most popular movement of the *Suite Gothique*. (One singularly modern measure of popularity suggests that it is: it has far more entries on YouTube than any of the other movements.) It is a true *perpetuum mobile*, in that there is one note value (in this case the sixteenth note) that is both always present and never superseded by a quicker note value—that is, until the last several measures, where the intensity is ramped up for a dramatic ending. The relentlessness of those sixteenth notes, along with a sense that the piece at least comes across as being difficult to play—virtuosic—is part of what makes it fit the genre of “toccata” as that genre was understood in the late nineteenth century. There are, of course, other organ toccatas from about the same time as the Boëllmann that are constructed similarly, in particular the work by Boëllmann's mentor Eugène Gigout—the *Toccata in B Minor* from 1890—and the famous Widor *Toccata* from 1879.

It is interesting to remember that in the Baroque period, the word “toccata” was understood entirely differently. A toccata was a piece in several sections, with contrast between the sections. The Buxtehude *Praeludium* that is the other subject of these columns is in toccata form, though under a different name. Whereas we sometimes think of a toccata as a piece that is meant to show off virtuosity, in the sense of speed, dexterity and general flashiness, originally the word denoted a piece that was meant to show off the variety of possibilities inherent in a keyboard instrument. Of course in this Boëllmann *Suite*, the work as a

whole, amongst all of its movements, shows off a generous subset of what the organ of the composer's time could do, with different textures being assigned to different movements rather than to different sections of a continuous piece.

### Textures

The sixteenth-note *perpetuum mobile* of this movement manifests itself in three different specific textures, with slight variants. The first texture, found initially in the opening, occupies about 55 measures out of the total of 111 (Example 1). The second texture involves the sixteenth notes' moving to the left hand and the introduction of syncopation (Example 2). This texture is present in 32 measures. In both of these textures, the sixteenth notes are in chord patterns and remain within one hand-span. That is, the hand does not have to turn over to reach the notes of each chord shape. This is a crucial factor in the technical learning of the movement. The third texture displays more variety within itself. It first shows up in measure 26 (Example 3). With its variants, it accounts for 18 measures, only three of which occur before measure 67. It more or less takes over the ending of the piece.

Each of these three textures is first introduced in a manuals-only passage. The pedal, whenever it comes in, is providing slower-moving motifs, starting with what most listeners familiar with the piece would probably identify as the principal theme (Example 4). This theme returns several times, sometimes as is, sometimes in octaves. Other than this, the pedal provides quarter-note or slower harmonic foundation.

### Hand placement

What from amongst these initial observations about texture might have interesting implications for learning the piece? Several things stand out.

Although the two hands are never meant to be played on separate manuals (all of the several manual changes, at m. 20, 28, 35, 53, 61, etc., involve moving the whole texture to a new keyboard), there is never any ambiguity about which hand should play which notes. I have scarcely ever seen a piece about which I would so confidently predict that every player would make the same hand choice decisions. The hand choice that makes sense is that represented by the placement of notes on staves in the Durand edition (and for that matter every other edition that I have seen). There are a very few spots where it would not be actually impossible to take an isolated left hand note in the right hand—the first note of m. 10, a few notes in m. 20 and similar passages—but it would always be awkward. This is interesting, since working out hand choices has been a focus of our discussion of several of the previous movements of the Boëllmann and also of the Buxtehude. It is a step that is just not relevant here.

For the majority of the quarter-note beats of this piece, each hand is playing a chord shape that fits under the hand without a change of hand position. Each of the manual examples above illustrates

### Example 1



### Example 2



### Example 3



### Example 4



### Example 5



this. (In two beats of Example 3, the right hand's notes are not chord shapes: this is the exception. In any case, the notes fit under the hand without a shift in hand position.) This means that fingering choices are also subject to less variation than usual, though not as little variation as the hand choices.

Most of these quarter-note-long chord-shaped note patterns succeed one another without the need for any planning. That is, the transition from one to the next is self-evident or, at least, straightforward. This manifests itself in different ways. For the long stretches of the left hand that resemble Example 1—eighth-note chords separated by eighth-note rests, or, looking at it another way, detached quarter-note chords—it is obvious that the rests give the hand an opportunity to regroup between chords and to play each chord with whatever fingering is simply the most comfortable. Furthermore, the chords are never very distant from one another on the keyboard. There are no scary leaps.

When the right hand has the pattern of the beginning measures, the transition from the last note of one (spread out) chord shape to the next is also easy. This is because the new beat begins in the direction in which the hand is already deployed, and the first note of the new beat is never too far away. After the thumb has played the fourth right-hand note of the piece, for example, the hand could easily play any note from c#'' to, say, e'''. The actual next note, g'', is extremely easy to find. It lies right under a finger, the fourth or fifth, most likely. This situation is repeated throughout the piece. If the fifth right-hand note of the piece were a middle C, for example, then the fingering and execution of that spot would go from being natural and easy to being extremely difficult. It would require careful planning and a lot of practice, and would

indeed set a lower ceiling on tempo. If that note were a very high note, say a''' or even c''''', then the logistics and planning would still be straightforward but the execution would be much more difficult.

When the left hand has spread-out chords, as in Example 2, those chords are also arranged in a way that lends itself to simple and predictable fingering, much like the opening right-hand motif, though the specific chord shapes are different. In many of these measures—mm. 20, 22, 24, 28 and several similar spots—the right hand has mostly scale-wise quarter-note or slower melodies for which fingering is again straightforward. However, in a few places—mm. 26, 34, 59, and quite a few measures near the end of the piece—there is a new element. The right hand has to play a legato melody in the top part of the compass while playing sixteenth notes below that melody. This is seen in Example 3. These are the spots in the piece where the fingering becomes somewhat involved. The solution, assuming that the legato of the upper line is to be preserved, is to use substitution in those upper notes, so that each note can be played by the most available finger and then held by the fifth finger. This leaves the rest of the hand free to carry out the sixteenth-note patterns (Example 5).

(Of course this is just one way of doing it, based, as usual, on my particular hand. Others might want to use 2/5 on the first beat of the new measure, for example.)

So, this piece—at least the manual part of it—is constructed out of surprisingly simple elements, easy to plan out as to fingering and also easy to execute. That does not mean that a student can play it well without working hard on it. For one thing, the coordination with the pedal is potentially quite challenging; for another, it is all meant to go quite fast—fast enough that it ceases to be

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easy, even though it is made up of easy elements. In fact, any student should be over-conscientious about mapping out the fingering for all of these simple elements, and also should practice all of the parts amply: short sections, one hand at a time, until each hand for each section has become second nature. Only then should the hands be put together. This is in principle exactly the same as with any other piece.

### Pedal part

The pedal part, unlike the hands, does provide the opportunity to make choices that will vary among different players. The opening pedal theme (Example 4) can be played with alternate toes and come out as legato as the player might wish. This way of playing it feels quite natural. Furthermore, there are no indications for use of the swell pedal or other non-note-playing uses of the feet during the passages in which the pedal plays this theme. However, there are also a number of different heel-and-toe-based pedalings that could also make sense. Given the time and place of the creation of this piece, any of the above could represent the composer's assumptions about how it might be played. Since it is important that this theme be played easily with spontaneity, it is key that the student feel comfortable with the chosen pedaling.

During the middle measures of the piece, the pedal line is often a harmonically based quarter-note bass line. Again, the pedaling can be worked out a number of different ways, none of them particularly complicated. For example, in mm. 29 and 31 the third-beat quarter note can be played with right heel or left toe, consistent with its being legato. Or the choice could be made to play the quarter notes detached, in which case all of the quarter notes could be played with the right toe.

Measures 73–75 are a particularly interesting case. Clearly, the higher notes will all be played with the right foot and the lower notes with the left. The choice as to whether to get the heels involved will be based on personal preference and also on the intended articulation. These notes have no articulation marked. The overall sound and texture at this point in the piece is loud and energetic. Are these notes an energetic driving bass, or a kind of *quasi misterioso* chromatic near-trill? Or something else? Choices about articulation here will possibly depend in part on acoustics. This is a good place for a student to try different things and listen carefully to different effects.

Near the end of the piece, the opening pedal theme comes back in octaves. (This starts in m. 85.) Needless to say, by physical necessity, the left foot will play the lower octave and the right foot will play the upper. And again, choices about toe and heel will be made based on both personal preference about technique and decisions about articulation. If the student has conceived the theme as legato from the beginning, then it perhaps makes sense to play it legato here. However, the fact that the texture here is very loud and emphatic might suggest a somewhat more emphatic articulation. On the other hand, the composer has altered the upper line, changing it from sixteenth notes to quarter notes (Example 6). What does

### Example 6



this suggest about the pedal articulation? This is another place where it would be interesting for a student to try different things and listen carefully.

### Pedals in octaves

There are two things to mention about practicing a pedal part that is in octaves. The first is that, all else being equal, it

is easier both to learn the part and to execute it in performance if the toe and heel choices are the same for both feet. This is certainly not absolutely necessary, but it will happen naturally here, since the black note/white note patterns largely determine the heel placement. The second thing—more crucial—is that practicing the feet separately is useful and important. Doing enough of that will make everything about putting all of the parts together easier and more secure. The protocol for practicing a passage like this should include practicing each foot separately with each (separate) hand, as well as the feet as a unit with each hand. Probably practicing each foot separately with the left hand is the most important component of practicing the passage.

### Crescendo marking

The composer has, rather considerably, limited *crescendo* marking (mostly, see m. 76) to places where the pedal line is both low and slow. That makes it as easy as it can be to choreograph the use of the swell pedal or, on a modern organ, of the toe studs or the crescendo pedal. This should be incorporated into the separate pedal practicing from the beginning, not left to the step of putting parts together.

### Practice strategies

It is always important to practice parts and combinations of parts thoroughly enough so at each step of the way the material being practiced becomes easy and natural. A specific reason that it is important to do so with this piece is that it is meant to go fast. Of course, no one must play it at the given metronome marking. It can be very effective slower than that, and also faster if it is executed well. However, at any tempo, it is important that the feeling of the piece not be at all deliberate, that it trip along lightly but—as it goes on—powerfully. In particular, it is important that the quick upbeat notes in the pedal part slip into the stream of sixteenth notes in the right hand in a way that has energy and momentum, and doesn't interrupt the flow of those notes. This can be achieved only if everything is very solidly—extra solidly—prepared.

This ends our trek through some aspects of the study and practicing of two very different important works of the organ repertoire. Next month I will give an overview of what we have learned and observed, and try to draw some general conclusions. ■

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## In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



### The seat of the Bishop

I've always been a sucker for construction equipment. The other day I was walking up Second Avenue in New York, where a new subway line is under construction, and although I was on a schedule moving between appointments I couldn't help but stop for five minutes to watch an enormous crane lowering an electrical transformer the size of a UPS truck into a hole in the street. You can read about this massive project on the website of the Metropolitan Transit Authority at <<http://www.mta.info/cap/constr/sas/>>. (sas refers to Second Avenue Subway!) I've been involved in a consultation project in New York that has led me to learn something about the city's utility system, and I've seen maps and photos that show an underground labyrinth of train, maintenance, and utility tunnels, and electrical, gas, and steam lines. It seems unlikely that there's any dirt left under the streets of the city. Knowing something about that subterranean maze helps me understand just a little of how complicated it must be to create a new tunnel some four miles long, and sixteen new underground stations. And hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of dirt, stone, and rubble removed to create the tunnel has to be trucked across the city's congested streets and river bridges to be dumped.

It's a massive project that's made possible by millions of dollars worth of heavy equipment, including my crane, tunnel-boring machines, payloaders, dump trucks, and heaven knows what else. Equipment like this has been improved immensely in the last 20 years by advances in hydraulic technology. The principal

of hydraulics is that specially formulated oil (I know the root of *hydraulic* refers to water) is pressurized in cylinders, that pressure being great enough to lift heavy loads, turn rotary motors, or steer huge articulated equipment. Without these advances we wouldn't have Bobcats, those snazzy little diggers with cabs like birdcages that can turn on a dime.

Sometime around the year 1250, the great cathedral in Chartres was completed. Nearly 800 years later it still stands as one of the great monuments to religious faith in the world. Tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists visit there every year. The cathedral houses one of Christendom's most revered relics, the *Sancta Camisa*, reputed to be the tunic worn by the Virgin Mary at the time of Christ's birth. (*Camisa* and *camisole* come from the same root.) There is a labyrinth more than 40 feet in diameter laid in stone in the floor of the nave. The path of the labyrinth is about 13 inches wide and about 860 feet long (about a sixth of a mile), all twisted upon itself within the confines of the diameter. The towers are 300 and 350 feet tall, the ceiling of the nave is 121 feet off the floor, and the floor plan has an area of nearly 120,000 square feet, which is close to two-and-a-half acres.

Thousands and thousands of tons of stone lifted to great heights, and not a hydraulic cylinder in sight. The challenge and effort of building something like that with twelfth- and thirteenth-century technology is breathtaking. Most of us have been inside tall buildings, and most of us have been in airplanes, so we as a society are used to looking down on things. But imagine Guillaume, the thirteenth-century construction worker, coming home after a long day, flopping into a chair, taking a hearty pull from a mug of cider, and describing to his wife how that afternoon he had looked down on a bird in flight—the first man in town to be up that high!

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On December 27, 1892, the cornerstone was laid for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Amsterdam Avenue in New York City, one of only a few twentieth-century stone Gothic cathedrals. Celebrated as one of the largest Christian churches in world—the overall interior length of 601 feet is the longest interior measurement of any church building—it serves its modern congregation, hosts hundreds of thousands of visitors, and as the seat of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, it serves as a national centerpiece to the denomination.

While the full interior dimensions of the building have been completed, much of both the interior and exterior remain incomplete. The central tower,

The new pipe-digital combination organ at Masland Methodist Church in Sibul, Malaysia draws all eyes to the central cross, where the surrounding pipes are arranged like uplifted hands. Rodgers Instruments Corporation was honored to partner with Modern Pipe Organ Solutions of the U.K. on the installation.

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