



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music**

Mooiman, A.

### **Citation**

Mooiman, A. (2021, December 14). *An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247235>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247235>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Chapter 13. Organ improvisation in Paris

### 13.1 The French school of organ improvisation

At the beginning of chapter 12.4, I mentioned a ‘symphony’ for organ, improvised by Pierre Cochereau. In the French late-Romantic organ tradition, the term ‘symphony’ usually denoted an organ sonata; its background is the so-called ‘symphonic’ organ type of the late nineteenth century, in France developed notably by the organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The many nuances in dynamics and timbre such instruments could produce made it easier to create smooth changes, a quality that was associated with the sound of a symphonic orchestra. Cochereau, organist of *Notre-Dame de Paris* from 1955 until his death in 1989, was a famous twentieth-century representative of a French tradition of improvisation that originated in the nineteenth century and has lost only little of its brilliance since. Improvisation was, and still is, an indispensable feature of the French organ school that developed from the famous class of César Franck at the Paris Conservatoire, enriched by the technical rigour of the students of Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens. Names such as Charles-Marie Widor, Alexandre Guilmant, Louis Vierne, Charles Tournemire, Marcel Dupré, Jean Langlais and Maurice Duruflé are still well-known even outside the organ world, and the importance of this school for the work of Olivier Messiaen cannot be overestimated. The French tradition of improvisation is certainly not the only one in the organ world, but it is special insofar as it is relatively well integrated within the broader concert culture. The French organ school has already been the subject of countless articles and monographs; in this study the focus will be on the teaching of improvisation at the Paris Conservatoire in relation to aspects of genre and other *loci communes*. I will show how this teaching tradition was based upon a very limited number of genres which were treated with great formal rigour; moreover, students were supposed to apply very strict principles of voice leading. With respect to modulations, the common-tone principle was still being propagated. In addition, I will argue that notably in French music, specific stop combinations on the organ can be regarded as *loci* in their own right.

The organ has always been regarded the instrument par excellence for free improvisation. Several reasons for this can be mentioned. Since the Middle Ages, the organ has primarily been used in liturgy, which makes the church its natural habitat. There are many parallels between liturgy and theatre, and the function of music is one of them: it is always part of a larger whole. A liturgical event has so many aspects that are hard to predict in detail, especially with respect to the length of an act, that the ability to improvise music is often seen as a prerequisite for a church organist. Secondly, no two organs are the same. Where piano builders have usually produced models in series, every organ has its specific composition of stops (the disposition), intonation and outer appearance, all related to the space for which an instrument was built. There is no better way to make optimal use of the

possibilities of a particular organ than by improvising on it, guided by what the instrument has to offer.

Camille Saint-Saëns, who played the organ in *La Madeleine* from 1858 until 1877, described the circumstances in the France of his youth in an article in *The Musical Quarterly* from 1916:

Formerly, improvisation was the basis of the organist's talent; his virtuosity was slight – music written for organ with obligato pedal was beyond his powers. As a compensation we had improvisations of the highest order. (...) It is improvisation alone which permits one to employ all the resources of the large instrument, and to adapt oneself to the infinite variety of organs; only improvisation can follow the service perfectly, the pieces written for this purpose being almost always too short or too slow.<sup>1160</sup>

As a corollary of this situation, most French organists were hardly interested in composed music at that time (the 1840's).<sup>1161</sup>

Finally, an organ player has only limited control of the tone quality: he has to work with the instrument as it was built. The flip side of this is that the instrument provides a sonic frame: a specific stop may invite, or even call for, a particular kind of music. This might be for physical reasons: a very long and wide pipe, for instance, needs more time for the tone to reach its full resonance than a short one, which makes quick runs played with a 32' *Sousbasse* almost impossible to follow for a listener. The character of the sound and its concomitant associations also play a role: the fierce sound of a trumpet stop calls for a different kind of music than a tender *Bourdon*. Especially in the French Baroque, there was a tendency to indicate musical genres for organ by the names of the characteristic stops or stop combinations. The title *Basse de trompette*, for instance, implied much more than just a piece without pedals in which the principal melody was played in the left hand with a Trumpet 8' stop: it also created expectations with regard to tempo, character and construction of the piece. French organ music was based on a large number of such loci communes: *Tierce en taille* for a richly ornamented solo melody in the tenor, registered with a combination of stops including the fifth harmonic, *Plein jeu* and *Grand jeu* for two different types of plenum with corresponding types of music, etc. Even during the nineteenth century, such loci still exist: the soft reed stop *Voix humaine*, for instance, is traditionally used in combination with a *tremblant* for slow passages in chords. What may appear to be a deficit (the fact that the organist can't influence the tone) proves to be a catalyst for improvisation. In the words of Saint-Saëns: 'The organ is thought-provoking. As one touches the organ, the imagination is awakened, and the unforeseen rises from the depths of the unconscious.'<sup>1162</sup>

The liturgical situation in the predominantly Catholic churches in France made demands of an organist that differed from those in Lutheran and other Protestant churches. On the main organ were

<sup>1160</sup> Quoted in Smith, R.: *Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*. New York, 1983; 5.

<sup>1161</sup> Ochse, O.: *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium*. Bloomington, 1994; 31.

<sup>1162</sup> Quoted in Ochse, O.: op. cit., 60.

played preludes, offertories and postludes, and depending on the situation, versets in alternation with the choir or (during vespers) interludes in between (Gregorian) psalms that were sung by the choir. The choir was often accompanied by a second organist from the chancel organ. The *organiste titulaire* (who played the main organ) was not responsible for accompanying congregational singing, which played no role in the Catholic service.

### 13.2 The organ class at the Conservatoire de Paris

At the Paris Conservatoire, this improvisational background translated into the organisation of the organ curriculum. Organ belonged to the department of theory and composition: organ students were supposed to have first acquired a solid basis in harmony and counterpoint. An 1848 institutional report puts it as follows:

L'étude de cet instrument, destiné principalement à l'improvisation, se rattache essentiellement à celles de l'harmonie et de la composition, indispensables à l'organiste.

[The study of this instrument, which is primarily intended for improvisation, essentially attaches itself to the studies of harmony and composition, indispensable for an organist.]<sup>1163</sup>

There is one more reason why this organisational feature is less strange than it might appear today. Until fairly recently, organ players were trained as keyboard players in general. It should not be forgotten that until the 1920's, playing something on the organ required hiring pumpers to fill the bellows with air ('wind') by operating the levers with their feet. The organ was not an instrument one could practice for hours every day: it must have functioned as an extra specialisation. In the days of Bach, an organist was always also a harpsichordist; the pedal technique was primarily developed on a clavichord or harpsichord with a pedal board. In the nineteenth century, the piano took the place of the harpsichord as an organist's basic instrument, and the *pédalier*, a piano with a pedal board, became a popular practice instrument. Many well-known organ virtuosos and composers were in the first place very good pianists, including Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, and also Franck, who started his career as a piano prodigy. In his *Cours d'Improvisation* (1925 / 1937), Marcel Dupré still makes very heavy demands on the pianistic technique of the organ student. From the 1920's on, the installation of electric blowers enabled organists to practice much more freely on the large instruments in churches, which may have contributed to the modern separation between pianists (or harpsichordists) and organists. It means, however, that the organ repertoire up to

---

<sup>1163</sup> Quoted in Tandberg, S.E.: *Imagination, Form, Movement and Sound: Studies in Musical Improvisation* (diss.). Gotheburg, 2008; 76.

Messiaen was composed for players who possessed a very developed and flexible keyboard technique, and who mastered more instruments than just the organ.<sup>1164</sup>

During the French Revolution and the years of the Reign of Terror, the church had fallen into disgrace, and the organ with it. Many instruments were demolished, and there is a genuine hiatus in the French organ culture around 1800. From 1810 on,<sup>1165</sup> a revival started that would culminate with the magnificent French organ school at the end of the nineteenth century. Public secular performances would mainly occur during inaugurations of new or rebuilt instruments, either in churches or in organ builders' workshops,<sup>1166</sup> but even liturgical organ playing in France was occasionally strongly influenced by non-religious music.

One important consequence of the situation in Paris is that also on the level of composing, there was much less of a separation between organ repertoire and music for other instruments. Franck brought composing for the organ to a new level (at least in the context of nineteenth-century musical culture), but he was obviously much more than an organ composer. Similarly, in the oeuvres of Widor, Vierne, and many others, scores for the organ formed only a part of their compositional output (though in many cases, it is mainly their organ music that is still being performed today). This broad scope is not without importance for the 'horizons' of such organ scores, and it is one of the reasons for discussing the French tradition as an example of 'improvising without a score' in this study. The American organist Wallace Goodrich, who went to Paris in the 1890's to study with Widor, reflects as an eye-witness on this aspect:

In no other country has the organ achieved so high a position of honor among musicians, or have so many of the greatest contemporary composers interested themselves in the organ, both as executants and as writers of organ music. I refer particularly to composers of established reputation and recognized preeminence in all forms of music: orchestral, instrumental, and choral.<sup>1167</sup>

The professorship for organ was reinstalled at the *Conservatoire de Paris* in 1819; the first musician to be appointed was François Benoist, the teacher of Saint-Saëns and Franck, but also of many other still famous composers who are normally not associated with the organ, such as Bizet (who received a *premier prix* in organ in 1855<sup>1168</sup>), Delibes, and Massenet. Benoist held the position for an impressive 53 years; in 1872 he was succeeded by Franck. After Franck's death in 1890, Widor was appointed to the post, and in 1896 Guilmant succeeded him. During most of these years, the curriculum of the organ class remained basically the same. There were three group lessons per week

<sup>1164</sup> In the nineteenth century, this included the harmonium; particularly in France, this instrument became very popular, both in churches and in *salons*.

<sup>1165</sup> Ochse, O.: op. cit., 18.

<sup>1166</sup> Ochse, O.: op. cit., 7.

<sup>1167</sup> Quoted in Ochse, O.: op. cit; 224.

<sup>1168</sup> Ochse, O.: op. cit., 224.

from 8-10 in the morning; typically the group consisted of about five students. Though different teachers emphasised different topics, generally far more time was spent on improvisation than on composed music. The content of the lessons corresponded with the examination requirements, which equaled the requirements for the *concours* of the conservatoire as well as for auditions for positions as an *organiste titulaire*. The typical elements were: the *à vue* harmonisation of a plainchant melody, an improvised fugue, later also an improvised piece in sonata form, and (from 1852 on) playing from memory a composed piece: initially a Bach fugue, later a ‘classical piece’. Before 1852, students did not have to play any composition!<sup>1169</sup> As mentioned above, only students with sufficient prior knowledge of harmony and counterpoint were admitted to the class, and Franck also expected them to possess the necessary technical skills for the repertoire pieces.<sup>1170</sup> In his memoirs, Louis Vierne describes the shock that he and other organ students felt when Widor succeeded Franck: Widor didn’t assume that students would already have a sufficient technical basis, and, much more than Franck, focused on a rigorous technical training.<sup>1171</sup>

The organ classes took place on a rather tired and small instrument in the conservatoire, not to be compared with the richness of Franck’s magnificent organ in the *Sainte-Clotilde*, Widor’s in the *Saint-Sulpice*, or Guilmant’s in *La Trinité*. This situation may seem surprising to us today: isn’t the contact with the sound of the instrument inherent in improvisation? How could a student learn to improvise ‘symphonic’ music on a chamber organ? Probably there were practical reasons not to teach in the church: it was not logistically possible due to the scheduling of masses; it was too expensive; or, it simply was not allowed. Another reason, however, might be the extremely academic approach to improvisation, which must have given the exercises a rather high level of abstraction. Still, some contemporary writers already criticise the lack of practical relevance of the organ course at Paris Conservatoire. In 1843, the Escudier brothers<sup>1172</sup> commented in *La France musicale* on the fact that the majority of the pieces to be played in liturgy were not prepared for in the organ class, and in 1845, the organist and organ builder Félix Danjou called this aspect of the official teaching almost sterile.<sup>1173</sup> In the next sections, the different elements of the improvisation teaching at the Paris Conservatoire will be examined briefly.

### 13.3 The chorale

What is most surprising today is not even the level of abstraction of the improvisation assignments – more about this below – but the rigidity of the system. It is striking that so many hours per week were

<sup>1169</sup> Tandberg, S.E.: op. cit., 74-75.

<sup>1170</sup> Tandberg, S.E.: op. cit., 80.

<sup>1171</sup> Vierne, L.: ‘Souvenirs’. In: Emmanuel, M. (ed.): *In memoriam Louis Vierne*. Paris, 1939; 28-30.

<sup>1172</sup> Léon and Marie Escudier were well-known music critics, music publishers and journalists.

<sup>1173</sup> Both quoted in Ochse, O.: op. cit., 152.

spent on so few types of exercises, and especially that the curriculum remained roughly the same for at least a century. In the words of Rollin Smith, ‘Franck studied under Benoist exactly what he himself later taught when he succeeded Benoist as professor of organ.’<sup>1174</sup> Given the enormous changes in musical styles on the opera and concert stages during the same period, this is incredible indeed.

One of Franck’s first students in 1872 was Paul Wachs. Wachs did most of his studies under Benoist, and already had won his *premier prix* in 1872. Nevertheless, he dedicated to *son maître* Franck his improvisation treatise *L’Organiste improvisateur*,<sup>1175</sup> published in 1878. In the same year, the (second) rebuilding by Cavaillé-Coll of the old Cliquot-organ in *Saint-Merry*, where Wachs had been appointed *organiste titulaire* in 1874, was inaugurated with a concert given by, among others, Franck.<sup>1176</sup> *L’Organiste improvisateur* consists of two parts: in part one, the sonata and the fugue are treated, and part two discusses liturgical improvisation, including the harmonisation of cantus firmi. The introduction explains the reason behind the longstanding fixation on the sonata and the fugue as improvisational models:

Lorsque l’on improvisera parfaitement la Sonate et la Fugue, les autres plans de morceaux, que nous aurons lieu d’enseigner dans la seconde partie de ce traité, seront faciles à improviser.<sup>1177</sup>

[When one can improvise perfectly the sonata and the fugue, the other designs of pieces, which we will have the opportunity to explain in the second part of this treatise, will be easy to improvise.]

In other words: the improvisational models do not serve as examples of practical situations, but as two poles of improvisational technique. Indeed:

Le plan de la Sonate et celui de la Fugue, renferment tout ce que peuvent [sic] renfermés d’autres plans.<sup>1178</sup>

[The designs of the sonata and of the fugue contain everything that can be contained by other designs.]

The second part of his treatise exceeds the focus of the curriculum of the conservatoire in that Wachs discusses and gives examples of different types of liturgical improvisation, including the chorale. Because these short pieces are stylistically extremely conservative in comparison with contemporary music for the concert stage (including Franck’s organ music!), they will not be discussed in this study. However, Wachs’s treatment of the chorale will be examined briefly here, since it was an indispensable item at improvisation exams.

<sup>1174</sup> Smith, R.: *Toward...*; 4.

<sup>1175</sup> Wachs, P.: *L’Organiste improvisateur: Traité d’improvisation*. Paris, 1878. For this source I have benefitted from Béatrice Piertot’s article ‘Treatises about Improvisation on the Organ in France from 1900 to 2009’. In: *Orgelpark Research Report no. 3*. Amsterdam, 2013; §355-356.

<sup>1176</sup> Smith, R.: *Toward...*; 19, 133.

<sup>1177</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 1.

<sup>1178</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 31.

Wachs explicitly sees improvisation as ‘instantaneous composition’, and writes that the reader of his book will therefore find assignments (*données*) that correspond with those in composition treatises.<sup>1179</sup> Likewise, the harmonisation of a plainchant melody in the bass or in the soprano corresponds with the training of strict counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire. Almost 50 years later, Charles Koechlin published his *Précis des Règles du Contrepoint* in which exactly the same rules and approach are still taught.<sup>1180</sup> The method is entirely based on a *chant donné* in whole notes [cantus firmus], and the harmony is severely limited:

Le contrepoint n’use que d’accords parfaits et accords de sixte. Les sixtes et quartes, les quintes augmentées, l’accord 5 et tous les autres accords (excepté ceux des *retards* qu’on énoncera plus loin) sont *rigoureusement interdits*.<sup>1181</sup>

[In counterpoint, only triads in root position and first inversion are used. Sixth-four chords, augmented and diminished triads and all other chords (except for suspension chords which will be explained later) are strictly forbidden.]

It is a stylistic universe that has broken free from any historical musical style (though it contains elements of different styles and can in this sense be called eclectic) and only exists as a theoretical construct. The type of four part harmonisations with the *chant donné* either in the upper or in the lower voice, as they were taught in the organ class, corresponded with the exercises in written counterpoint to be found in courses such as Koechlin’s; the only difference was that the rules were applied less rigidly. Each tone of the cantus firmus is harmonised with one chord (often with suspension), while the other voices are ornamental according to Fuxian species counterpoint. No wonder that students were supposed to have received a thorough previous training in (written) harmony and counterpoint before they could enter into the organ class! A harmonisation of *Ave maris stella* in Wachs’s treatise may serve as an example:<sup>1182</sup>



Example 13.3.1

<sup>1179</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 1.

<sup>1180</sup> Koechlin, Ch.: *Précis des Règles du Contrepoint*. Paris, 1926.

<sup>1181</sup> Koechlin, Ch.: op. cit., 1.

<sup>1182</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 54.



In order to be able to improvise such harmonisations, Wachs recommends that the student learn by heart a number of fixed formulas for all possible progressions in the *chant donné*. The movement of a second up or down, for instance, can be harmonised as follows:<sup>1183</sup>



Example 13.3.2

The idea is to apply such models to a complete melody.

Nous conseillons d'écrire d'abord, d'étudier quelques pièces par cœur ensuite, et enfin, d'en improviser beaucoup. Un mois de travail consciencieux suffit pour se familiariser avec cette formule.<sup>1184</sup>

[We advise starting by writing, then studying some pieces by heart, and finally to improvise many of them. One month of conscientious work suffices to familiarise oneself with this formula.]

Interestingly, Wachs actually does suggest that this type of accompaniment is useful in liturgy: it can be applied 'in between verses of a hymn' where it brings more unity than a contrasting theme without connection to the hymn melody.<sup>1185</sup> Wachs must have been referring to the situation in the Roman rite, where the organist could play free versets. Traditionally the churches in Paris followed the (Neo-Gallican) Parisian rite, in which the unaltered cantus firmus was required for specific organ versets. Possibly, this situation led to including this item in the organ class curriculum. The Parisian rite was gradually supplanted by the Roman rite from 1855 on, and the latter became mandatory throughout Paris in 1874.<sup>1186</sup> Wachs also mentions the possibility of playing the *chant donné* in the tenor, an option that was not required at the conservatoire but that recalls French Baroque hymn settings, for instance in Nicolas de Grigny's *Livre d'Orgue*, where the melody is often played *en taille* with the pedals (albeit in a five-part setting).

Much later, Louis Vierne wrote about this way of treating plainchant melodies:

Rien n'était plus formulaire que ce contrepoint, rigoureux sans l'être, bourré de quintes retardées, d'accords de septième prolongée avec quintes, de marches, en un mot de tout ce qu'on interdit en

<sup>1183</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 50.

<sup>1184</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>1185</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 49.

<sup>1186</sup> Ochse, O.: op. cit., 127-131.

contrepoint écrit. C'était la «tradition», et Franck n'y pouvait rien changer. En ces temps révolus, on n'hésitait pas à accompagner d'un accord chaque note des neumes, effet tout aussi artistique que s'il s'appliquait aux vocalises du «bel canto». Il a fallu attendre jusqu'à Guilmant pour voir disparaître cet errement qui fut remplacé par l'accompagnement normal du grégorien et son commentaire en paraphrase: quelle révélation et quel soulagement!<sup>1187</sup>

[Nothing was closer to formula than this counterpoint, strict without being exactly so, crammed with delayed fifths, with chords with a prolonged seventh and with fifths, with sequences – in a word, with all that is forbidden in written counterpoint. It was the 'tradition', and Franck couldn't change anything about it. In those bygone days one did not hesitate to accompany each note of the neumes with a chord, an effect about as artistic as if it were applied to the vocal runs of bel canto. We had to wait until Guilmant to watch this error disappear and being replaced with the normal accompaniment of Gregorian chant and its commentary in paraphrases: what a revelation and what a relief!]

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Gregorian chant was in a state of decline. A movement of revival and restoration came from several directions: particularly well-known is the work of André Mocquereau and Joseph Pothier in Solesmes, but Franck had already collaborated with the Jesuit Louis Lambiotte in a five-volume edition of plainchant (still rhythmicised).<sup>1188</sup> Another important influence came from the *École Niedermeyer*, and at the end of the century from the *Schola Cantorum*. After the replacement in the early twentieth century of the old and corrupted Medicea edition with a new edition that was based on musicological work by the monks of Solesmes, manuals for organists started to appear that did more justice to the melodic flexibility of plainchant. This was the context for Vierne's comments quoted above. Together with the revival of Gregorian chant, a renewed interest in modality arose that has been very important for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century French music, including the work of Olivier Messiaen.<sup>1189</sup>

In the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, a collection of handwritten notes is catalogued under number Ms. 8707, entitled: Notes préparatoires et sujets de fugue et d'improvisation pour la classe d'orgue de César Franck au Conservatoire de Paris [preparatory notes, and fugue and improvisation themes for the organ class of César Franck at the Conservatoire de Paris]. It is a rather heterogeneous collection of rough sketches intermingled with more neatly written pages on different paper sizes. There are several sets of (sketches for) assignments for examens and concours, dated 1873 and 1874. Invariably they consist of a plainchant melody in whole notes without bar lines, a fugue theme and a theme for a sonata form. An example is this set for the concours of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, 1874:

<sup>1187</sup> Vierne, L.: op. cit., 22.

<sup>1188</sup> Lambiotte, R.P., Franck, C.: *Chant grégorien, restauré par le R. P. Lambillotte de la compagnie de Jésus; accompagnements d'orgue par C. Franck*. Paris, 1857.

<sup>1189</sup> Cf. Mooiman, B.: 'Olivier Messiaen en de Franse harmonie'. *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2004); 19-43.



Example 13.3.3

The beginning of the plainchant melody resembles the *Pange lingua* hymn. There are more melodies in the notes with a similar beginning, however all with different continuations. Possibly they are of Franck's own invention; at least that could explain the rather unusual occurrence of a B-flat in a Phrygian melody.

### 13.4 The fugue

It might be tempting to understand the obligatory improvised fugue at the *Conservatoire de Paris* as a direct connection with the longstanding tradition of improvising fugues on the organ that dates back to the seventeenth century. However, there is a great distance between Baroque traditions where composed fugues can be seen as special instances of a broader improvisational praxis, and the academic approach of the nineteenth-century French conservatoire where the situation is reversed. Just as the improvised chorale harmonisation in the previous section was rooted in strict written counterpoint, so the improvised fugue was modelled after the French academic fugue as it was taught until well into the twentieth century.

Based on the writings and teaching of François-Joseph Fétis and Luigi Cherubini, a prescriptive model of fugue had been developed that is generally called the *fugue d'école* [scholastic or school fugue]. Key texts from the very end of the nineteenth century are the treatises of Théodore Dubois and especially André Gédalge (both from 1901). As with strict counterpoint, its goal was not so much to study or even imitate historical compositions, but rather to develop a technique of writing. Cherubini regarded the fugue as the transition from the strict counterpoint to free composition, and even stated:

Tout ce qu'un bon compositeur doit savoir peut trouver sa place dans la fugue, elle est le type de tout morceau de musique, c'est-à-dire, que tel morceau qu'on compose, pour qu'il soit bien conçu, bien

régulier, pour que la conduite en soit bien entendue, il faut que, sans avoir précisément le caractère et les formes de la Fugue, il en ait l'esprit.<sup>1190</sup>

[Everything a good composer should know finds its place in the fugue, it is the model of all musical compositions: even when these do not have the form and the character of a fugue, they should still all have its spirit, if they should be well-constructed and understandable.]

Indeed, the French school fugue was a mountain that every composer – and improviser – had to climb. The most striking difference with historical fugues of, for instance, Bach, is the rigid standardisation in the *fugue d'école*: where Bach was clearly highly flexible in his application of contrapuntal techniques, depending on the possibilities a fugue subject offered, the conservatoire fugue had to contain a fixed number of structural components, including one or more countersubjects, a counter-exposition, a *stretto* and a pedal point. It is interesting to compare the French approach with Czerny's treatment of the fugue. In his *School of Practical Composition* op. 600, Czerny refers to Reicha's *Traité de haute composition musicale*;<sup>1191</sup> in Reicha's discussion of the fugue, the countersubject is a matter of minor importance, and the counter-exposition is optional, too. In line with Reicha, Czerny's description of the fugue in his composition book is much less dogmatic than the French *fugue d'école*, let alone his example in the *Anleitung*.

In his discussion of the improvised fugue, Paul Wachs clearly distinguishes between composed and improvised fugues; the latter do not have the same strictness ('le contrepoint rigoureux ne peut s'improviser'<sup>1192</sup> [strict counterpoint can't be improvised]). The difference should not be exaggerated, though: the improvised fugue still has many features of the school fugue. Four voices are the standard; for Wachs, however, a countersubject is not necessary in the improvised fugue. There can be harmonic licenses such as unisons, but the 6/4 chord is strictly forbidden, both in the *style libre* and the *style sévère*.<sup>1193</sup> In general the guidelines for improvising a fugue are more concerned with the impression the music makes on a listener:

Ce ne sont pas de savants combinaisons, qu'il faut chercher dans la Fugue improvisée, mais la clarté, la limpidité mélodique des parties, une harmonie corsée et une bonne disposition de parties.<sup>1194</sup>

[It is not ingenious combinations one should strive for in an improvised fugue, but clarity, melodic vividness in all parts, an effective harmony and a good disposition of the voices.]

In the episodes, improvised fugues do not have the complex canons, inverted imitations, etc., that one finds in written fugues; just simple imitations between two voices will do. Wachs writes that an

<sup>1190</sup> Cherubini, L.: *Cours de Contre-point et de Fugue* (French / German edition). Leipzig, [1835]; 100.

<sup>1191</sup> Czerny op. 600 ; 118.

<sup>1192</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 17.

<sup>1193</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 19.

<sup>1194</sup> Ibidem.

improvised fugue in four parts in reality only has an exposition and a stretto with that number of voices; in the rest of the piece, there can be passages in two and three voices as well – for the sake of variety!<sup>1195</sup> For the same reason, one should take care to vary the sequences as they occur in the episodes.<sup>1196</sup> He adopts a practical stance with regard to the stretto, too. Though one should try to design the subject in such a way that it allows for one or more stretti, it might happen that a subject does not afford this possibility. In this case one should fake a stretto, for instance by modifying the theme as in the following example:<sup>1197</sup>



Example 13.4.1

Again, Wachs advises the student to familiarise himself with fugal procedure by writing elements such as the exposition, episodes or stretti first, and then to improvise them.<sup>1198</sup> It is interesting that Wachs's examples, just like Czerny's in the *Anleitung*, intend to give an impression of how an improvisation could take shape, rather than showing idealised versions.

Wachs's treatise does not necessarily reflect all details of the teaching of Franck. Vierende's memoirs suggest that the latter did ask his students to come up with countersubjects:

Aucun membre du jury n'aurait toléré une entrée de fugue à un ton éloigné ; (...) ; il fallait donc évoluer dans cette camisole de force, et la difficulté, loin de rebuter notre Maître, excitait ses facultés imaginatives qui se donnaient libre cours dans le soin des détails. Pour la fugue, il s'attachait particulièrement à la construction des épisodes à laquelle il faisait concourir, le plus possible, l'ingénieuse marche d'un plan tonal et l'élégance d'écriture d'un contrepoint à imitations de plus en plus serrées. A chaque instant, il prenait le clavier et donnait l'exemple; et quel exemple! – Alors que le

<sup>1195</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 20

<sup>1196</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 22.

<sup>1197</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 24.

<sup>1198</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 30.

patient avait de la peine à élaborer un contre-sujet correct, lui, dans le même temps, en avait trouvé cinq ou six: «Voyez, on peut faire cela... ou bien cela... ou encore...» Puis, du ton le plus naturel: «Allons, choisissez, et faites-moi une bonne fugue !...» Je vous laisse à penser l'ahurissement de l'élève qui souvent, très souvent, bafouillait lamentablement. Puis, on finissait par en sortir.<sup>1199</sup>

[None of the members of the jury would have tolerated a fugal entry in a remote key ; (...) So we had to maneuver in a straitjacket, and the difficulty, far from disheartening our maître, excited his imagination, to which he gave free rein in attention to details. In fugue he attached particular importance to the construction of the episodes, while bringing together, as far as possible, the development of an ingenious tonal plan with the elegant writing of counterpoint including imitations with ever closer stretto. Every now and then he would sit down at the console and give us an example. And what an example! When a student had trouble working out one correct countersubject, he, within the same time, had found five or six. "See, you can do this... or else this... or even..." Then, in the most natural tone, as though nothing had happened, "Come now, choose one, and make a good fugue!" I leave you to imagine the confusion of the student who often – very often – made a lamentable mess of it. Eventually, one would manage to get out of it somehow.<sup>1200</sup>]

Vierne himself was at least as strict in his teaching; according to Maurice Duruflé, he demanded 'the counter-subject to be thought out and played just as though it were written. The episodes were to have an essentially polyphonic style, while tonal relationships had to be logical. In a word, one learned all the elements that were necessary to proceed alone'.<sup>1201</sup> In 1925, Marcel Dupré writes that 'the study of the masters shows that a counter-subject is not strictly obligatory' ('L'étude des Maîtres nous montre que le Contre-Sujet n'est pas absolument obligatoire').<sup>1202</sup> However, his point of view is that the student should make it his purpose to maintain the countersubject throughout the fugue.

At conservatory exams and *concours* an imposed theme (*theme imposé*) was the norm. Most organ teachers at the Paris Conservatoire have left collections of such fugue subjects. The ones of Franck are often taken from the music of other composers, ranging from Viennese classics such as Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, to early Romantics such as Schubert, Mendelssohn and Chopin, including opera composers such as Gluck, Rossini, Auber and Méhul. In an interview Gabriel Pierné, Franck's ex-student and successor in the *Sainte-Clotilde*, tells about the notebooks with themes which Franck always carried with him in the inner pocket of his frock-coat. One of the rectangular books, bound in black, contained fugue themes, with the subjects on one side and the answers on the other. The other notebook was bound in red, and contained themes by classical composers and by Franck

<sup>1199</sup> Vierne, L.: op. cit., 24.

<sup>1200</sup> Smith, R. : *Louis Vierne: Organist of Notre Dame Cathedral*. Hillsdale, 1999; 45.

<sup>1201</sup> Quoted in Smith, R.: *Louis Vierne...*; 473.

<sup>1202</sup> Dupré, M.: *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*. Paris, 1925; 77.

himself, intended for the sonata improvisation. During a lesson, Franck would take the books from his pocket and choose a theme for a student to develop in an improvisation.<sup>1203</sup>

### 13.5 The sonata

The improvisation of a piece on a 'free theme' (*thème libre*), i.e., a piece in sonata form, was added to the requirements of a *premier prix* for organ in 1843.<sup>1204</sup> Like the previous two assignments, it was extremely academic in nature; in fact, it could be termed a 'school sonata'. Very unusual stylistically, it was a monothematic sonata form; instead of providing a contrasting second theme, the improviser was supposed to repeat the main theme in the dominant or relative major key. Wachs writes about this:

C'est dans le but de simplifier le travail de mémoire, que nous engageons l'élève à reproduire le même sujet entendu à la tonique, à la dominante. (...) On varie l'aspect d'un sujet, soit en changeant d'harmonie, soit en ajoutant un rythme ou une formule accompagnante, soit en tronquant ce sujet, etc. etc. une [sic] note tenue suffit pour donner cette variété.<sup>1205</sup>

[In order to simplify the act of memorisation, the student is invited to reproduce on the dominant the same subject that was heard previously on the tonic. (...) The appearance of a subject can be varied either by changing the harmony, or by adding an accompanying rhythm or formula, or by truncating the subject, etc. Already a sustained note suffices to bring this variety.]

As an example of such variation techniques, a few variants of the beginning of a theme are provided by Wachs (ex. 13.5.1 and 13.5.2). The melody of the theme itself remains untouched:<sup>1206</sup>

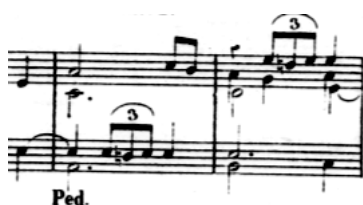


<sup>1203</sup> Smith, R.: *Toward...*; 159.

<sup>1204</sup> Smith, R.: *Playing the Organ Works of César Franck*. Stuyvesant, 1997; 3.

<sup>1205</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 5.

<sup>1206</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 2-8.



Example 13.5.1

And in the dominant key, with *note tenue*:



Example 13.5.2

Wachs explains the sonata assignment by dividing it into five parts (*périodes*) and working out an example of an entire piece, just like he did with the fugue. The form (in a major key) thus presents as follows:

- 1<sup>ère</sup> période: exposition du sujet [exposition of the subject]
- 2<sup>me</sup> période: modulation à la dominante (pont) [modulation to the dominant (bridge)]
- 3<sup>me</sup> période: sujet à la dominante [subject in the dominant key]
- 4<sup>me</sup> période: développements [developments]
- 5<sup>me</sup> période: rentrée du sujet au ton primitif [return of the subject in the principal key]

The terminology is different from what is usual today: ‘exposition’ is used here for the presentation of the theme in the tonic, the fourth period contains several ‘developments’ of the theme, and the *réexposition* is simply called *rentrée du sujet*; since there is no second theme and the fifth period is supposed not to modulate, the theme sounds only once. In his example sonata, Wachs adds a coda



that is, however, not mentioned as an extra period. Modulatory sections such as the bridge and the development are strongly based upon sequences, ornamented with the *formules accompagnantes*.

With respect to harmony, Wachs makes a few remarks that are worth mentioning here. Apart from sequences, he shows two other ways to modulate. The first way is by means of what he peculiarly calls *accords brisés*: chords that ‘ne donnent par eux-mêmes, l’idée d’aucune tonalité’ [by themselves do not give the impression of any tonality] – Schoenberg terms such chords *vagierende Akkorde*. Wachs only discusses the diminished seventh chord, and explains how it can be used for quick modulations. Though he writes at the end of the nineteenth century, his explanation is still completely based upon the principle of common-tone modulations (→ chapter 9.8):<sup>1207</sup>

**Il suffit de modifier une, deux ou trois des notes qui les compose, selon le cas, pour se trouver dans le ton voulu.**

**EXEMPLES.**

**Vent-on aller en Ut ? voici :**

[It is sufficient to modify one, two or three of the tones that make up the chord, depending on the circumstances, in order to get to the desired key. / Would you like to go to C major? Look here:]

*Example 13.5.3*

Another category he mentions are enharmonic modulations (though the previous example was enharmonic as well, strictly speaking). The following modulation also uses the common-tone principle:<sup>1208</sup>

**Vent-on passer dans un ton diézé? nous ferons cela :**

[When we want to move to a key with sharps, we can do this:]

*Example 13.5.4*

In 1937, Marcel Dupré added to his *Traité d’Improvisation à l’Orgue* (1925) an introductory volume: *Exercices préparatoires à l’improvisation libre*.<sup>1209</sup> The two books together form the *Cours Complet d’Improvisation à l’Orgue*. The *Exercices préparatoires* contain an elaborate explanation of the ‘school sonata’. Though Dupré’s examples are considerably more dissonant than Wachs’s (despite being extremely diatonic), the general plan and the approach are strikingly similar. Dupré’s

<sup>1207</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 16.

<sup>1208</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 17.

<sup>1209</sup> Dupré, M.: *Exercices préparatoires à l’improvisation libre*. Paris, 1937.

is even more strict in prescribing fixed lengths per section, resulting in a table that also mentions other technical aspects such as key, texture, and registration:<sup>1210</sup>

Forme	Détail	Mesures	Plan en Ut maj.	Plan en La min.	Disposition vocale thématique	Registration
Exposition	Thème	4	Ut maj.	La min.	au Soprano	R. Fl. 8 ou Fl. 8, 4
id.	1 <sup>re</sup> Com <sup>te</sup>	4	de La min. à Sol	d'Ut maj. à Mi min.	id.	id.
id.	Reprise du Thème	4	Ut maj.	La min.	à l'Alto	id.
id.	2 <sup>e</sup> Com <sup>te</sup>	4 ou 8	de Fa maj. à Ut	de Ré min. à La min.	id.	id.
Pont	1 <sup>re</sup> Phrase	4	de La min. à Mi min.	de Mi min. à Si min.	Voix alternées	G: B <sup>4</sup> 8 ou Salic. 8
id.	2 <sup>e</sup> Phrase	4	de Mi min. à Ré maj.	de Si min. à Sol maj.	id.	id.
id.	3 <sup>e</sup> Phrase	4	de Ré maj. à Sol maj.	de Sol maj. à Ut maj.	id.	id.
2 <sup>e</sup> Tonalité (Dominante ou Relatif)	Thème	4	Sol	Ut	au Ténor	M.D.R: Fl. 8, 4 Naz.
id.	Com <sup>te</sup> concluant	8	Sol	Ut	id.	M.G.G: Fonds doux 8
Développé	1 <sup>re</sup> Phrase rythmique	8	Sol min.	Ut min.	Voix alternées	G.R: Fonds doux 8
id.	2 <sup>e</sup> Phrase rythmique	8	Sol 8 min.	Ut 8 min.	id.	R. Fonds doux 8
id.	Phrase lyrique	8 à 12	La maj.	Ré maj.	Péd. en 8 pieds R. accompagnant puis Alto puis Soprano	G. Fonds 8 8
id.	Préparation de la Rentrée	4	Modulant	Modulant	Harmonique	R: Gambe 8 pp
Rentrée	Fausse Rentrée du Thème	4	Ré maj. ou Si maj.	Si min. ou Sol 8 min.	Péd. en Ténor ou en Alto	R. très doux Péd: Fl. 4 solo
id.	Com <sup>te</sup> (relie au Pont)	8	Ut maj.	La min.	id.	id.
Rappel du Pont	Une seule Phrase	4	Ré min. à Ut maj.	Ré min. à La maj.	Voix alternées	G <sup>4</sup> B <sup>4</sup> 8 ou Salic. 8
Conclusion	Thème	4	Au ton principal présenté sur un autre degré.	La maj.	Soprano accompagné d'un contrepoint chromatique ou diatonique (ou Canon, s'il y a lieu).	R: voix célestes
id.	Com <sup>te</sup> final	8	Breve modulation éloignée et Pédale de Tonique.	Breve modulation éloignée et Pédale de Tonique.	Libre	id.

Example 13.5.5

At the beginning of his treatise, Wachs writes that a theme for an organ improvisation should be appropriate to the character of the instrument:

Tous les motifs de Sonates de Beethoven et de Mozart ne se prêtent pas au style de l'Orgue ; de même que certains motifs de Mendelshon [sic], Bach, Haendel, seraient très-mal placés au Piano.<sup>1211</sup>

[Not all motifs from sonatas of Beethoven and Mozart lend themselves to the style of the organ; similarly certain motifs of Mendelssohn, Bach and Handel would be out of place on the piano.]

It seems, however, that his maître Franck was less scrupulous: in the notes one finds material from a large diversity of pieces (with and without composer names), including a surprising number of pieces that are still evergreens today, including Friedrich Silcher's song *Die Lorelei*, Schubert's *Wohin* from

<sup>1210</sup> Dupré, M.: *Exercises...* ; 58.

<sup>1211</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 2.

*Die schöne Müllerin*, many piano compositions by Chopin (for instance the *Polonaise* in c minor op. 40 no. 2,<sup>1212</sup> or the middle theme from the *Fantaisie-Improromptu*) but also by Beethoven (for instance the theme of the first movement of the sonata in A-flat major op. 26), Mendelssohn (the first *Lied ohne Worte*), and many others. Moreover, chamber and symphonic music is included, for instance the *Funeral March* from Beethoven's *Eroica*, Beethoven's third piano concerto, or even the *Bridal Chorus* from Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Invariably Franck notates only the beginning of a melody, often an antecedent, and usually very faithful to the original. Interestingly, it was quite normal to use traditional *Noëls* for organ versets in which no cantus firmus was required.<sup>1213</sup> Franck made a handwritten *Recueil de Noëls* which is today in the BnF (Ms. 8615 (1)), a set of 54 complete noel melodies without text; the left hand staves are empty.

In 1896, Guilmant became head of the organ class, with Vierne as his assistant. Vierne tells how he unsuccessfully tried to convince Guilmant of the merits of including a second subject in a sonata form improvisation:

«Il faudrait, me répondit le maître, que le jury donnât deux sujets, et si vous saviez le mal que l'on a pour en trouver un seul bon !... On n'admettrait pas un second thème du cru du concurrent; on pourrait le croire trituré à l'avance...» - «Franck, lui dis-je, avait de cela une intuition certaine, quand à son concours il se servit dans l'improvisation libre du sujet de fugue comme repoussoir. » - «Franck était Franck et il n'en pousse pas entre les pavés», me répondit Guilmant. Nul plus que moi n'en était convaincu.<sup>1214</sup>

[“Then the jury would have to give two subjects,” replied the maître, “and if you only knew how hard it is to find one good one! They wouldn't allow a second theme of the competitor's own invention because they'd think that it had been worked out in advance.” “Franck,” I said, “had an infallible instinct for that; at his own competition he used the subject given for the fugue as a foil in his free improvisation.” “Franck was Franck, and he isn't found on every corner,” Guilmant answered. No one was more convinced of that than I.<sup>1215</sup>]

Vierne himself also wrote subjects for the ‘free improvisation’. Fifty of them were collected and published by Jean Bouvard.<sup>1216</sup> Vierne's subjects, like Franck's, are usually four bars long, and often encompass only an antecedent. They have a strong modal and sometimes chromatic character. As was the case with Dupré, the ‘rules’ may have been as rigid as ever, but they couldn't control all aspects of the music.

<sup>1212</sup> I deem it likely that Chopin's polonaise has inspired Franck to his *Pièce héroïque* for organ.

<sup>1213</sup> Ochse, O.: op. cit., 129.

<sup>1214</sup> Vierne, L.: op. cit., 53.

<sup>1215</sup> Smith, R.: *Louis Vierne...* ; 123.

<sup>1216</sup> Emmanuel, M. (ed.): *In memoriam Louis Vierne*. Paris, 1939; 197-201.

### 13.6 Improvisation in practice: Vierne, Dupré; conclusion

On basis of the teaching at the *Conservatoire de Paris* one might be inclined to dismiss the nineteenth-century French school of organ improvisation as formalistic. Indeed, the difference with many modern ideas about improvisation could hardly be greater. Dupré calls improvisation (like composition) ‘un phénomène essentiellement cérébral’<sup>1217</sup> [an essentially cerebral phenomenon]. Wachs advises the student to start improvising very slowly in order to avoid playing pointless (*inutiles*) notes and getting lost in unintended modulations.<sup>1218</sup> Dupré will later stress the importance of practicing slowly, too. All this points towards the idea that improvisation is a very fast process of premeditation: the goal is to develop mental routines for this and to have these executed at a high speed. There seems to be little room for the spontaneous.

On the other hand, Wachs writes at the beginning of his treatise:

Tous les moyens que nous allons enseigner pour improviser, tels que: les formules, les marches, les modulations, etc, etc, ne sont que des jalons auxquels doivent s’aligner les élèves, jusqu’à ce qu’ils soient assez forts et assez surs de leur chemin, pour diriger eux-mêmes les élans de leur inspiration.<sup>1219</sup>

[All improvisation techniques that will be taught in this treatise, such as formulas, sequences, modulations, etc., are but beacons that should serve as a guide to the students, until they are sure enough and certain of their way, and can lead themselves the flights of their fancy.]

In other words: the treatise offers just the beacons, and the truly creative improvisation starts only when the student has mastered the basics. Indeed, the Parisian organ class delivered first class organists with a very rich musical imagination. The recorded improvisations of Tournemire (1931), for instance, in no way make a formalistic or academic impression, and the ‘symphonic’ compositions of Widor and Vierne do not resemble Wachs’s ‘school sonata’ at all.

In addition, the short improvisations that Vierne recorded in 1928 do not seem to show a clear connection with the standard curriculum of the organ class. After the introduction of the electric microphone, it became more possible to record the sound of a large organ like *Notre-Dame*’s. Vierne was invited to record improvisations; however, when he heard that the side length of a 78 rpm record was only 3 ½ minutes, he was disappointed and wondered what he could do in such a short time: ‘Allons, quelques marches bien pompière [sic] et bien républicaines feront l’affaire!’ [Oh, well, some pompous, Republican marches will do!]<sup>1220</sup> Several eyewitnesses do not consider these improvisations typical of what the *maître* did during masses and concerts, which must have sounded like his composed symphonies; nevertheless, they show a remarkable perfection of form and

---

<sup>1217</sup> Dupré, M.: *Exercices...*; Préface.

<sup>1218</sup> Wachs, P.: op. cit., 2.

<sup>1219</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>1220</sup> Quoted in Smith, R.: *Louis Vierne...*; 513.

considerable harmonic richness, more so than, for instance, Albéniz's improvisations discussed earlier (→ chapter 12.3). These improvisations were transcribed as well, in this case by Maurice Duruflé, who published them in 1954 and gave them titles: *Marche épiscopale*, *Méditation*, *Cortège*. Considering length and character, these make an impression similar to pieces from the collection *Pièces de Fantaisie*.

[13.6 #1 Vierne: Marche Épiscopale (rec. 1928)<sup>1221</sup>]

The march is, if not Republican, then certainly pompous. It is played on the full organ and has an ABA' structure. The A section is built on a cadential motif with what is usually the bass line (^4 - ^5 - ^1) as a soprano. For the B section, Vierne seems to change to the *Positif* and the *Récit* with the swell boxes closed, however still with the full registration. This part has more chromatic harmony and abundant modulations; the return to the home key for the final section is elegant and highly effective. Just as described earlier in the analyses of historical piano improvisations, here, too, the final part actually only makes the impression of repeating the A section: in reality it is different, and it is clear that Vierne focused on remembering the main motif, not a whole section. This leaves him space for some exciting re-harmonisations of the motif, after which the piece comes to a relatively conventional end. Vierne not only never sacrifices the metre; he also builds perfectly coherent phrases (usually in groups of four 'bars') and never seems to hesitate.

[13.6 #2 Vierne: Méditation (rec. 1928)<sup>1222</sup>]

The *Méditation* is an *unendliche Melodie* in a triple metre on a flowing accompaniment in triplets. Its core is a four-bar subject that could very well have been one of Vierne's themes for students. It is developed in sequences and continuous modulations, though from time to time it stabilises on a structural key such as the dominant. Initially the diatonic melody with sweet dissonances recalls the atmosphere of a French Romantic *chant sans paroles*, a genre that comes close to salon music; however, Vierne's rich but elegant chromatic modulations help the piece to escape the mediocre. A soft coda with flute stops on a tonic pedal finishes the piece.

[13.6 #3 Vierne: Cortège (rec. 1928)<sup>1223</sup>]

The *Cortège* is again a clearly articulated ABA form, played on the full organ. It could very well serve as a *Sortie* at the end of a mass. It is a relatively diatonic piece in the manner of a Romantic minuet such as Léon Boëllmann's *Ménuet gothique* from the *Suite gothique*, or the minuet in Edvard Grieg's

<sup>1221</sup> <https://youtu.be/KCS4fRoOgGg> (uploaded 2015 by 'Danijel Drilo')

<sup>1222</sup> <https://youtu.be/UyxUGtVp34A> (uploaded 2008 by 'a55b47')

<sup>1223</sup> <https://youtu.be/XydZWYSdSoE> (uploaded 2018 by 'Organa Reginae Caeli')

piano sonata op. 7. This improvisation is just over two minutes, which is shorter than the available time span.

It is very likely that the rigorous training in the organ class equipped those organists with a command of form, melodic coherence, harmonic richness and contrapuntal inventiveness to become the brilliant improvisers many of them were. The examples in Wachs's treatise, for instance, may be harmonically rather dull, but the few principles of modulation he teaches (→ section 13.5) are a potential goldmine for harmonic adventures. Indeed, Vierne's chromatic harmony, and also that of Franck and Fauré, has nothing of this dullness, but can nonetheless be understood on the basis of these principles. This means that the aim of the abstract training at the conservatoire was to develop technical skills that would enable the student to cope with a multitude of challenges in musical life. It is an attitude towards teaching that recalls García *père*, who almost exclusively worked on vocal technique with his students (→ chapter 4.6). Just like the early-nineteenth-century bel canto student, the late-nineteenth-century organ student was embedded in a musical environment that nourished him with musical content in the way a native speaker absorbs his language from childhood on. It was precisely because the teaching was so abstract that it guaranteed a broad applicability – provided that the student was already familiar with musical loci.

Though the situation is very different for an organ student in the twenty-first century, there may be principles in nineteenth-century teaching that are still valid today. In this respect it is interesting to have a closer look at Dupré's *Cours complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*, since it builds on nineteenth-century teaching models, even though the publication dates are relatively late. As I mentioned earlier, the second volume of the *Cours complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* was published first (1925). This *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* has a scope that can only be compared with Czerny's *Anleitung*. Just like Czerny, Dupré aims to combine a survey of possible forms of free improvisation with a didactic approach by presenting the different genres in a progressive order. The book opens with introductory and practical chapters on organ technique and harmony; what follows is in fact a *Formenlehre*. A chapter about *le thème* develops a theory of mode and rhythm that anticipates Messiaen, but also pays attention to harmonic and contrapuntal aspects of a subject. The chapter *Contrepoint – Choral* discusses strict counterpoint in a nutshell, and introduces Gregorian melodies as an important resource for improvisation. Dupré writes:

Le Chant Grégorien fournit une mine mélodique d'une richesse incomparable dans laquelle l'organiste a (...) le *devoir* de puiser.<sup>1224</sup>

[Gregorian chant yields a melodic mine of incomparable richness from which to draw is the *duty* of an organist.]

<sup>1224</sup> Dupré, M.: *Traité d'improvisation à l'Orgue*. Paris, 1925; 135.

The following chapters discuss successively the movements of a Baroque suite (historically not an organ genre), the *fugue d'école* (with explicit reference to Gédalge's treatise), including five-part fugues and double fugues (Dupré was famous as an improviser of fugues), variations including the passacaglia, and the four movements of an organ symphony. This last item is discussed much more 'realistically' and in line with existing compositions of this type than the 'school sonata' as treated by other authors. Interestingly, Dupré also includes in the chapter on variations the *Triptique*, a genre that had become popular in early-twentieth-century French organ music. A chapter on free forms – including the fantasy, the rhapsody and character pieces (*morceaux descriptifs*) – concludes the enumeration. A detailed chapter on liturgical playing is added as an appendix.

In his description of genres, Dupré's focus is on form as a concatenation of sections and keys. Genres as loci are taken for granted; unlike Czerny he does not give characteristic examples of, for instance, a scherzo or a *romance sans paroles*. The aspect of concatenation, however, is interesting with respect to the awareness of form from the point of view of an improviser; chapter 14 will explore this issue further.

The first volume of the *Cours complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*, the *Exercices préparatoires à l'improvisation libre*, was published twelve years later. It offers additional material to prepare for the difficulties that the *Traité* poses for the student, but with a strong focus on the improvisation of free pieces (as opposed to fugues). The preface to the first volume copies that of volume two, but an interesting passage has been inserted:

Mais il y a en improvisation, indépendamment de l'inspiration et de l'imagination, tout un métier à apprendre, toute une discipline à inculquer aux élèves futurs organistes. Dix ans d'enseignement et de préparation aux épreuves d'improvisation du Conservatoire de Paris m'ont démontré d'une façon irréfutable que l'improvisation se travaille selon les mêmes principes et les mêmes méthodes que la virtuosité d'exécution (prise dans son sens le plus élevé).

C'est, en effet, fragmentairement, par la répétition patiente et sans cesse améliorée d'un même passage, que l'élève arrive à progresser en improvisation. Il doit travailler très lentement, mais rigoureusement en mesure, en s'imposant de ne pas s'arrêter et de ne pas faire attendre un temps avant d'être arrivé au terme des 4 ou 8 mesures qu'il s'est fixé d'avance. Il est nécessaire qu'il recommence chaque passage jusqu'à ce qu'il le joue sans hésitation en s'efforçant, à chaque reprise, non point de varier, mais de reconstituer, aussi fidèlement que possible, ce qu'il aura déjà improvisé d'acceptable. C'est simultanément qu'il faut chercher à acquérir la correction d' "écriture" et la correction du rythme et de l'exécution.<sup>1225</sup>

[But, independently from inspiration and imagination, there is an entire métier to be learned in improvisation, an entire discipline to inculcate into the students who will be organists. Ten years of

---

<sup>1225</sup> Dupré, M.: *Exercices...*; 'Préface'.

teaching and of preparation for the improvisation exams at the Paris Conservatoire have shown me irrefutably that improvisation has to be studied according to the same principles and the same methods as virtuosity in performance (taken in the most elevated sense).

Indeed, it is by fragmenting, patiently repeating and continuously improving the same passage, that the student will make progress in improvisation. He has to study very slowly, but rigorously in time, forcing himself not to stop and not to wait for one beat before he arrives at the end of a group of 4 or 8 bars he planned to play. It is necessary that he recommences every passage until he can play it without hesitation, taking care not to vary at every repetition, but to reconstitute as faithfully as possible the acceptable passages that he already improvised before. One should simultaneously try to improve ‘writing’, rhythm and performance.]

Indeed, the *Exercices* offer abundant material to improve this kind of craftsmanship, organised in 12 *leçons* [lessons]. The book opens with harmonising major and minor scales in the soprano, tenor and bass. Next, a very large number of *chants donnés* in half notes has to be harmonised (without 6/4 chords), again in the same voices. After this, the rhythm becomes more diverse and the melodies are extended to antecedent / consequent combinations, both modulating and non-modulating. When a theme is answered by a completely different melody, this is termed a *commentaire*. Step by step, Dupré develops this basic material into the ‘school sonata’ already discussed before.

Something that seems highly relevant to me, even today, is the fundamental importance that Dupré attaches to harmonising melodies. Basses (with or without figures) to be harmonised are not included in the treatise, which is understandable since this activity was covered by another subject at the Conservatoire: *accompagnement* (more or less: keyboard harmony). Émile Durand’s *Traité d’Accompagnement au piano*, for instance, almost completely consists of figured basses.<sup>1226</sup> Realising a figured bass primarily develops voice leading technique; realising an unfigured bass has a similar effect, though a certain degree of chord choice is added. Harmonising a soprano, on the other hand, is a different activity: there are always several options, and especially with simple melodies the choice can be bewildering. Here one must find chord progressions that ‘work’ with the given melody, but that are logical and consistent in themselves as well. A skillful voice leading technique is presupposed. Placing a melody in the bass or tenor poses new problems; usually a melodic bass line is rather atypical as a bass, and tenor settings bring in a contrapuntal element that many students find difficult to master. Still, assuming that melodic ideas play a major role in a tonal improvisation, fluency in the harmonisation of melodies is a prerequisite, especially for keyboard improvisers.

Dupré’s demands with respect to the process of practising are controversial: his method of practising slowly and repeating the same fragment often seems not only scholastic, but even contrary to the very idea of improvisation. Here as well, though, one should not forget that his goal is to train

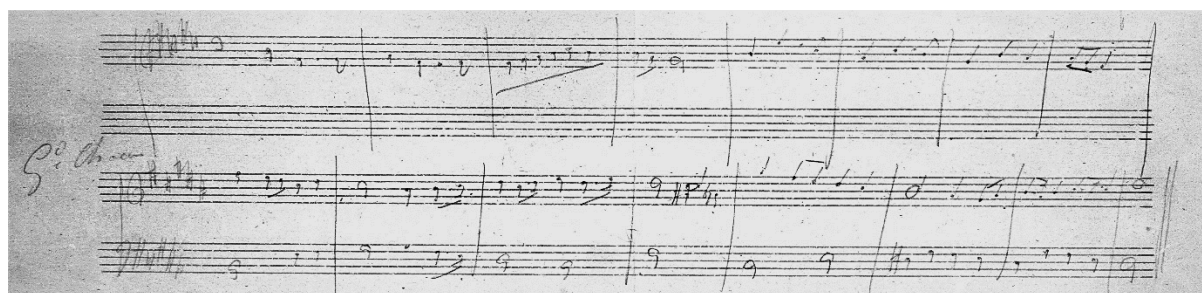
---

<sup>1226</sup> Durand, E.: *Traité d’Accompagnement au piano*. Paris, 1884.



aspiring improvisers, not to prepare for an improvised performance. Indeed, it is also my experience that it is in fact very instructive to try and repeat what just has been improvised before, because it increases one's awareness of what is played (or sung). In chapter 11.4 I referred to a similar experience in playing for ballet classes. The importance of memory training for an improviser can hardly be overrated, and it is by repeatedly going through the same mental steps that musical craftsmanship in particular is developed. The idea of doing this in the context of complete phrases is also a clever one, and it obviously corresponds with the fundamental function that is allotted to the musical phrase throughout this study.

To conclude this section, let us return to the 'father' of the French organ school, *le père Franck* (as he was called by his students). Franck died before any recording technique that could have captured his improvisations had been developed, and he did not publish a treatise on this topic. However, a glimpse of his way of proceeding during his own improvisations can be caught from his notes. There are several sketches of (beginnings of) original melodies, sometimes with ideas for registrations. Often the outline of an accompanying bass is sketched, but occasionally Franck adds a chord or inner voice, as if he did not want to forget this option.



Example 13.6.1

In the example are two fragments: the first one is the beginning of an unaccompanied melody in E major; the second one is the first eight bars of a theme in B major with the bass added. In the fourth bar Franck has written a chromatic alto part that reinforces the plagal connection between the first and second phrases. The text says *Grand Chœur* [full organ], which implies that this theme was intended for festive, march-like music – perhaps not unlike Vierne's *Marche épiscopale*.

To summarise: when the nineteenth-century improvisation training for organists at the Paris Conservatoire is regarded as a practice-oriented subject, of which the 'course objectives' had to coincide with what organists were supposed to do in liturgy and during concerts, it may seem to be very remote from most present-day ideas about improvisation. If, however, it is seen as a primarily technical training that was intended to equip the students with 'skills' that would facilitate their diverse future developments, elements of it might even prove to be useful today. A potential problem is that at that time, musical education could rely on experiential knowledge of musical loci – a

condition that has changed nowadays. A method such as Dupré's might still be valuable today, provided that the student is really familiar with the musical style that forms its context.