

## Rubato

written by Ignazy Jan Paderewski

Rhythm is the pulse in music. Rhythm marks the beating of its heart, proves its vitality, attests its very existence. Rhythm is order. But this order in music cannot progress with the cosmic regularity of a planet, nor with the automatic uniformity of a clock. It reflects life, organic human life, with all its attributes, therefore it is subject to moods and emotions, to rapture and depression.

**There is in music no absolute rate of movement. The tempo, as we usually call it, depends on physiological and physical conditions. It is influenced by interior or exterior temperature, by surroundings, instruments, acoustics.**

**There is no absolute rhythm. In the course of the dramatic developments of a musical composition, the initial themes change their character, consequently rhythm changes also, and, in conformity with that character, it has to be energetic or languishing, crisp or elastic, steady or capricious. Rhythm is life.**

According to a current story, Chopin used to say to his pupils: "Play freely with the right hand, but the left one act as your conductor and keep time." We do not know whether the story should be afforded the benefit of the doubt. Even if it be exact, the great composer contradicted it most energetically in such wonderful compositions as the Etude in C-sharp minor, preludes No. 6 and No. 22, the Polonaise in C minor, and in so many fragments of others of his masterpieces, where the left hand does not play the part of a conductor, but most distinctly that of a prima donna. Another contradiction of this theory, or rather of the way Chopin put it into practice, is the testimony of some of his contemporaries. Berlioz affirms most emphatically that Chopin could not play in time, and Sir Charles Hallé pretends to have proved to Chopin, by counting, that he played some Mazurkas 4/4 instead of 3/4 time. In replying to Charles Hallé, Chopin is said to have observed, humorously, that this was quite in the national character. Both Berlioz and Hallé evidently intended to testify against Chopin. Berlioz, although extremely sensitive to the picturesque and the characteristic, was not emotional at all; besides, the instrument which he played best, the instrument on which he even tried to perform before some of his friends is *Symphonie fantastique*, the sonorous and expressive guitar, could not reveal to the great man all the possibilities of musical interpretation. As for Sir Charles Hallé, a distinguished, but rather too scholastic pianist, this estimable gentleman, who knew so many things, ought to have known better here. Our human metronome, the heart, under the influence of emotion, ceases to beat regularly—physiology calls it *arythmia*. Chopin played from his heart. His playing was not national; it was emotional. To be emotional in musical interpretation, yet obedient to the initial tempo and true to the metronome, means about as much as being sentimental in engineering. Mechanical execution and emotion are incompatible. To play Chopin's G

major Nocturne with rhythmic rigidity and pious respect for the indicated rate of movement would be as intolerably monotonous, as absurdly pedantic, as to recite Gray's famous *Elegy* to the beating of a metronome. The tempo as a general indication of character in a composition is undoubtedly of great importance; the metronome may be useful; Melzel's ingenious device, though far from being perfect, is quite particularly helpful to students not endowed by nature with a keen sense of rhythm; but a composer's imagination and an interpreter's emotion are not found to be humble slaves of either metronome or tempo.

Our Olympian predecessors, the classics, although living under different conditions, and on a plane above that of our present-day nervousness and excitement, seemed to realize the impossibility and containing some of their ideas within the limits of the indicated time and rate of movement. In Bach's works we sometimes see *Adagio* and *Allegro*, *Animato* and *Lento* in the same bar. Haydn and Mozart frequently use expressions such as *quasi cadenza*, *ad libit.*, leaving thus to the interpreter the entire freedom as to the rhythm and rate of movement. The most human of them, the most passionate, the only composer who knew almost exactly how to express what he wanted, Beethoven, took quite particular care of tempi and dynamic indications. When we look at the first movements of the D minor Sonata, of the op. 57, of the op. 111, at the *Largo* in the op. 106, and especially at the beginning of the *Adagio* in the op. 110, we see the embarrassment and discomfort to which all the tempo-sticklers and metronome-believers are exposed when attempting to play or to teach these works. And yet, in spite of his stupendous, almost abnormal, sense of precision, in spite of his vast knowledge of Italian terminology—a quality in which nearly all modern, non-Italian composers are positively deficient—Beethoven could not always be precise. Why? Because there are in musical expression certain things which are vague and consequently cannot be defined; because they are according to individuals, voices or instruments; because a musical composition, printed or written, is, after all, a form, a mould: the performer infuses life into it, and, whatever the strength of that life may be, he must be given a reasonable amount of liberty, he must be endowed with some discretionary power. In modern meaning discretionary power is *Tempo Rubato*.

*Tempo Rubato*, this irreconcilable foe of the metronome, is one of music's oldest friends. It is older than the romantic school, it is older than Mozart, it is older than Bach. Girolamo Frescobaldi, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, made ample use of it. Why is called *rubato* we do not really know. All lexicons give the literal translation of it as robbed, stolen time. Now, the most common, the most frequent, the simplest form of *Tempo Rubato* is obtained by *ritenuto* or a *ritardando* which, as every one knows, serve to increase the value of respective notes. Where there is an increase, there can have been no robbery. Addition cannot be called subtraction. Although we protest against the use of the words: robbed, stolen time, we recognize that the very essence of *Tempo Rubato* is a certain disregard of the established properties of rhythm and rate of movement. The French translation of *Tempo Rubato*: movement *derobe*, while not giving the full, modern meaning of it, is the best of all. It implies the idea of fleeing away from the strict value of the notes, evading metric discipline. We should be inclined to call it evasive movement.

It would be wrong to pretend that Tempo Rubato is the exclusive privilege of the higher artistic form in music. Popular instinct evolved it probably long before the first sonata was written. Expressed although nameless, it has always been in all national music. It is Tempo Rubato which makes the Hungarian dances so fantastic, fascinating, capricious; which so often makes the Viennese waltz sound like 2/4 instead of 3/4 time; which gives to the mazurka that peculiar accent on the third beat, resulting sometimes in 3/4 + 1/16:



Example 1 ( → [see a larger image](#)).

The literature concerning Tempo Rubato is not particularly rich. Apart from short notes to be found in lexicons, we can only quote a few really authoritative opinions, always admitting that there may be some others, and very valuable ones, unfortunately unknown to us. Liszt, in his beautiful though rather bombastic volume, *Frederic Chopin*, devotes to the subject a few interesting passages; Ehlert and Hanslick, as far as we can remember, seem to pay little attention to it; on the contrary, Nieck, Kleczyński, and especially Huneker, treat it more extensively.

Peculiarly enough, all the above-mentioned authors speak about the matter incidentally and in conjunction with Chopin, as if Tempo Rubato were an exclusive attribute of Chopin's music; all of them say excellent things without solving the question, which is still and will be open to further investigation.

We do not pretend to have anything to say upon the subject; our desire is to remove the stigma of morbidity which seem to be attached to it. **Tempo Rubato is not pathological, it is physiological, as it is a normal function of interpretative art.** In our opinion it is not so much *Tempo Rubato*, as the romance of Chopin's life and his premature end, which are responsible for the silly superstition that Chopin should be played in a soft, sentimental, sickly manner. Tempo Rubato is a potent factor in musical oratory, and every interpreter should be able to use it skillfully and judiciously, as it emphasizes the expression, introduces variety, infuses life into mechanical execution. **It softens the sharpness of lines, blunts the structural angles without ruining them, because its action is not destructive: it intensifies, subtilizes, idealizes the rhythm.** As stated above, it converts energy into languor, crispness into elasticity, steadiness into capriciousness. It gives music, already possessed of the metric and rhythmic accents, a third accent, emotional, individual, that which Mathis Lussy, in his excellent book on musical expression, calls *l'accent pathétique*.

The technical side of Tempo Rubato consists, as is generally admitted, of a more or less important slackening or quickening of the time or rate of movement. Some people, evidently led by laudable principle of equity, while insisting on the fact of stolen time, pretend that what is stolen ought to be restored. We dully acknowledge the highly moral motives of this theory, but we humbly confess that our ethics do not reach such a high level. The making up of what has been lost is natural in the case of playing with



a well-balanced sense of vivid rhythm should guard the interpreter against any abuse.  
Excess of freedom is often more pernicious than the severity of the law.