

Refiguring Roles in Interpretation:

Case Study - Gabriel Fauré's *Impromptu no. 5, Op 102*

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This paper reports on a preliminary study where a group of 36 tertiary music students ranked selected musical parameters from several recordings of Gabriel Fauré's Impromptu no. 5, Op 102 played by master pianists. The purpose was to focus attention on a range of musical decisions requiring a performer's consideration and to encourage tertiary music performance students to reflect on how some aspects of performance influence the impression of performance quality more than others. Set against a discussion of both historical context and detail from the score, this exercise highlights several more general issues relating to the interpretative process. In particular, the way listeners' perceptions may influence the choices made by the performer is considered from a performer's perspective. Several underlying assumptions are also briefly discussed: i) that expert performance will be recognised by listeners; ii) that there will be a significant degree of concurrence between listeners about the differences between expert performance; iii) that a range of interpretations can be appreciated by informed listeners; iv) that listening to several performances (on CD and DVD) in conjunction with study of the score offers insights that are invaluable to the performer.

In this paper, listeners' responses to several recordings of Fauré's *Impromptu no 5, Op. 102* provide the focus for consideration of several broader issues related to preparing for piano performance, choices in interpretation and the contribution that listeners' reactions and group discussion may make to developing awareness of the interpretative process.

Based on the premise that listeners' responses are significant to the performer, I will argue that taking their reactions into account in the process of performance preparation is purposeful both for the development of individual performer's interpretations, and, that the discussion of structured group listening exercises such as that presented here, is one way to enhance musical performance training in a seminar or group learning situation.

For the performer of music in the Western tonal tradition, the primary task is to translate the composer's score into sound. Each performer draws on his/her own understanding of what the score implies based on a combination of intuition, analysis, stylistic awareness, knowledge of the composer's notational fingerprints together with a body of supporting historical and extra-musical contextual information. Readings by different performers are indicative of the range of possible choices available to the performer although some musical decisions may well be more compelling than others.

Studying several recordings of one composition encourages the engagement of the performer's imagination and reflection on the infinite range of subtle choices and that all musical scores present. Further, the decision to base this study only to recordings by expert pianists associated with the composer allows for

consideration of some individual readings that may also be in line with the composer's directions.

Composed in 1908/9, the *Impromptu no. 5, Op. 102* is unique in Fauré's catalogue as his only experiment in writing using the whole-tone scale which was very much in fashion at the time. The circumstances surrounding its composition were described by Marguerite Long:

At a concert of 'La Trompette' - a very popular chamber music society - we heard a work by Florent Schmitt in which the theme moved by whole tones. Fauré was annoyed by the success of this so-called novelty and said to me, furiously: 'Me too, I'm going to write a piece in whole tones.' (Nectoux, 1991, 382)

The resulting *Impromptu* is quite virtuosic, a *moto perpetuo* deliberately avoiding the composer's characteristic melodic expressivity. Darius Milhaud described as follows:

The use of the whole-tone scale does not depend on the augmented triad and does not imprison the harmony in a system of two chords and six notes. Fauré, faithful to the laws of diatonicism, treats it as a way of modulating, of escaping from the original key and then brings his melodic ideas back to it with the happiest imaginative touch. (Nectoux, 1991, 383)

Fauré presented this work to Marguerite Long who premiered it at the Salle Erard on 30 March, 1909.

In this work, directions for the performer are very clear in respect to tempo (crotchet = 168), character, (*Allegro vivo*) and dynamics. Fauré clearly distinguishes melodic tones from secondary voices as a melodic line in longer note values (minims) on the downbeats is highlighted by accent marks. The fast speed and consistency of the semiquaver movement gives the piece an étude-like surface. In light of the tradition of works of this type in the piano literature including etudes and toccatas of many composers including Paradisi, Chopin, Schumann, Moszkowski and Debussy, the need for both lightness and speed is implied. Not unusually for music in this period, while no pedalling is marked in the score, this in no way implies that none would be appropriate. Aside from highlighting the fragmentary melodic line (built on a descending 3-note step movement), the score provides no suggestion for articulation or touch. This leaves the pianist with a full range of options in respect to articulation - from super - *legato* through to *non-legato* - from playing *legato* "in the key-bed" to playing with a much shallower *non-legato* touch "on the top of the keys". Articulation choices may greatly affect the listener's impression of character and tone quality.

The overall structure of the 5th *Impromptu* is reasonably clear and should be possible to convey in performance. Tonally centred on f# minor, the work has 172 measures organized in three large paragraphs with a coda. Structural and cadential points are evident at measures 21 and 45. The second section begins at measure 45, the final section at measure 106 and there is a coda beginning at measure 152. Internal phrases are delineated by repeated melodic fragments and sequential figures. The overall musical design including sections (I, II, etc), and internal phrases (marked off with barlines) is illustrated as Table I in the Appendix.

For this study, four recordings by artists who had an association with Fauré were chosen. Apart from limiting the sample, in theory at least, these performers should have particular insight into the composer's intentions as represented in the score and they may provide the contemporary performer with a range of informed choices to take into account when preparing a new reading of the work. The recordings are: i) Robert Casadesus - Recorded 26 March 1951, re-mastered for Philips CD 456 739-2; ii) Vlado Perlemuter - Recorded September 1982, Nimbus NI5165; iii) Marguerite Long - Recorded November, 1933, issued on Columbia LP, re-mastered as Biddulph LHW035; iv) Yvonne Lefébure - 2 December 1980, reissued Disques FY, FYCD 088.

Throughout their long careers, both Robert Casadesus (1899- 1972) and Vlado Perlemuter (1904-2002) were celebrated performers of French music and Fauré's works in particular. As young musicians, they met Fauré in Paris in the early 1920s. Their playing is renowned for both sensibility and refinement. Marguerite Long (1874-1966) was a colleague and close associate of Fauré over many years. Her reputation was developed through performing solo and chamber music works and Fauré's *Ballade* for Piano and Orchestra in particular. The 5th *Impromptu* was a work she performed numerous times. Yvonne Lefébure (1898-1986) performed Fauré's piano music throughout her life, making a fine recording of a selection of many of the most challenging works in 1980 at the age of 82.

While every parameter of a composition is subject to choice on the performer's part, this investigation was concerned with selected musical parameters that have a significant impact on the reception of the performance and contribute to "the extent to which [the performance] coheres and is coherent, and the extent to which it convinces, or moves the listener," (Rink, *Early Music*, August 2001, 435). Perhaps particular choices made in respect to some elements of the work have a greater impact on listeners than others? Performance choices relating to the underlying conception of the piece, tempo, dynamics, articulation, tone quality and the planning and shaping of the musical structure may influence overall preference and impinge on the perceived "success" of a performance to varying degrees. If this is so, these are significant considerations for the performer during performance preparation.

In order to investigate whether there was any agreement amongst a group of listeners about which of these musical factors had a greater influence on preference, in this preliminary investigation, the perceptions and comments of 36 undergraduate music students on the four recordings were sought through a questionnaire, to be found in Appendix 2. The choices inherent in the questionnaire guided the students' listening. After time to peruse the score, the students were asked to choose, in principle, what might be the most important general considerations for a performer preparing to play this piece by ranking 6 musical parameters in order of importance; namely, concept of the piece, tempo, touch, articulation, dynamic range, and structure and shaping of phrases, and to note any other factors that they considered to be critical to a successful reading (for example, pedalling). Next, they were asked to compare their perceptions of the four performances in terms of tone, overall tempo, dynamic range, use of dynamic inflection, recording quality and audibility of structure and finally, to rank the performances on a 9-point scale. "Least," "never," "poor," were coded as "1" and "most", while "most frequent," "excellent" were coded as "9". A directed listening exercise, the content of the questionnaire implies a range of

assumptions and choices such as that the parameters selected for comment are notable in the interpretive process and that some musical elements may be more significant than others. The questionnaire form allowed for additional written comments explaining preference. Figure 1, below, shows the mean rankings that the student assigned to the six general concepts.

Figure 1: *Participants' ranking of the 6 musical concepts*

Concept, expressive content	Structure	Touch, articulation	Dynamics	Tempo	Other
5.89	4.42	3.78	2.89	2.94	0.0278

The highest mean ranking was for “concept, expressive content”. Many musicians are in agreement that having an overall concept of a work and a notion of the character of its musical content is paramount in order to achieve a convincing interpretation that transcends correctness and accuracy. A conception conveyed through the choices made in relation to the musical score provides the basis for an imaginative reading. It is manifested through the combination of the decisions made. That this notion is important was strongly supported by the student respondents as there was widespread agreement that having a concept of the piece was paramount. 33 out of 36 respondents chose “concept of the piece, expressive content” as the single most important factor for the performer to take into account in preparing for performance.

As may be seen in the Appendix, the next highly rated factor was the structure and the shaping of the phrases. One respondent ranked this as most important and 23 out of 36 respondents ranked it as next most important. Careful planning of structure and shaping of phrases allows the performance to “cohere.”

While there was less agreement about the relative importance of other factors in performance preparation, 20 students rated choice of touch and articulation as 3rd in importance, 17 ranked dynamics as next, while 20 ranked choice of tempo below the other factors. However, the rankings for tempo and dynamics were very similar. Many performers may agree that a range of *tempi* and dynamics is possible for this piece. Except for one student, all participants agreed that other factors (including pedalling), apart from those they had been asked to rank, were less important. Many professional pianists might dispute this as pedalling has such a significant impact on the clarity, articulation and sound quality in piano performance.

Overall, the students perceived the merits of the various musical choices made by Casadesus, Perlemuter, Long and Lefébure. Their responses indicated that they recognized that all the performances demonstrated a high level of expertise. In fact, although the performances were quite different, there was no strong preference for one performance over another. In terms of overall preference, the mean scores were very close, with high standard deviations as shown in Figure 2. Of the 35 students who stated a distinct first preference, 2 students preferred Casadesus, 11 Perlemuter, 12 Long and 10 Lefébure. The remaining student rated Perlemuter and Lefébure equally with a rank of 8 out of 9.

Figure 2: *Preference and overall impression*

Overall impression	Performance 1 Casadesus	Performance 2 Perlemuter	Performance 3 Long	Performance 4 Lefébure
Mean	6.11	6.70	6.57	6.82
Standard Deviation	1.33	1.16	1.61	1.33

There was fairly wide agreement that the recording of Perlemuter’s playing was of high quality with excellent tone quality.

Figure 3: *Recording quality*

Recording quality	Performance 1 Casadesus	Performance 2 Perlemuter	Performance 3 Long	Performance 4 Lefébure
Mean	5.91	7.47	3.28	6.91
S.D.	1.64	0.80	1.81	1.37

While many participants noted that recording quality was poor on Long’s recording, with 7 students rating it at “2”, and 13 students at “3”, that doesn’t seem to have affected the overall impression greatly, nor the rating of tone quality on that recording. All the recordings were considered to have an adequate tone quality. However, the somewhat muddy, distant tone quality of the recording of Casadesus’ playing may have influenced the low number of 1st preferences he scored.

The students correctly perceived the relative differences between the recordings in tempo (Appendix, Tables 7 and 13) and also that Long’s performance had somewhat greater fluctuations of tempo (Appendix, Table 8). Casadesus’ recording was indeed more stable in tempo than the others. Long’s conception of the piece as a vehicle for virtuosic display perhaps accounts for her faster tempo and slightly wider dynamic range. The differences between the performances in levels of dynamic inflection corresponded to the range of dynamics used. The mean scores for dynamics are shown in Appendix, Tables 9 and 10.

The students noted the high level of clarity which characterized the touch and articulation choices of Perlemuter, Lefébure and Long (as indicated in Appendix, Table 11).

The mean rankings for the audibility of structure were quite close as shown in Table 12. Perhaps the slightly slower performances by Perlemuter and Lefébure allowed the structure to be projected a little more clearly.

In my view, as detailed in Table 13 in the Appendix, a wide range of musical choices were made by the four performers particularly in terms of: i) tempo (hence durations are 1’59”, 2’25”, 1’51” and 2’12” respectively); ii) how the melody is projected and balanced with the surrounding figuration; iii) the choices of touch/articulation and iv) pedalling.

The conception of the piece, the idea of what it conveys and the sense of what is its underlying character is reflected in the technical approach, and this seems to

be differentiated in the four readings. Marguerite Long seems to view it as a showpiece for brilliant display of technique while Robert Casadesus and Yvonne Lefébure, in making it more lyrical, imbue it with a more imaginative, fantastical quality. Vlado Perlemuter seems to focus on discriminating between the layers of the work's intricate surface texture. The different interpretations of the piece are reflected in the markedly different *tempi* as well as the contrasted approaches to articulation and the conception of sound colour. For example, Marguerite Long emphasizes brilliance and speed with a slightly harsher and more direct tone quality than the other pianists. She also plays with considerably more inflection both of dynamic and tempo within the phrases. She is the only player to add an (unscored) *acceleration* in the coda and a *rit.* at the close of the piece. Jessica Duchén has remarked that Marguerite Long was a "self-appointed champion of Fauré's piano music" (Duchén, 2000: 163). Although Long comments in her own book on Fauré's piano music that "this music requires that one 'play it straight' without camouflage or trickery" (Quoted by Duchén, 2000: 163), Long seems not always to have followed her own advice.

Although recorded almost thirty years apart, both Robert Casadesus' and Yvonne Lefébure's performances emphasise lightness, clarity and transparency but *tempi* and recording quality are somewhat divergent on those discs. While very clear, Perlemuter's reading is slower and the overall sound quality tends to be heavier than that of the other players. The recording of Lefébure has a fine tone quality. Despite the fact that it is often out of the player's control, the effect of the recording quality on my own impression, particularly of the clarity in the performances, was considerable.

Once a high level of technical control of the instrument has been achieved, musical performance involves numerous choices, the sum of which makes for an individual interpretation. There will always be an element of personal taste in the discrimination between performances and the preference of one reading over another. As this brief study of performances of Fauré's *Impromptu no. 5* by master pianists demonstrates, there are many satisfactory readings of this piece which can be recognized and acknowledged by informed listeners.

There is considerable concurrence between the student participants' and my own impressions of the recordings as noted in the descriptive Table 13 in the Appendix. However, while Robert Casadesus' playing is well in line with the composer's comments on performance as found in his letters, notably where he expresses his dislike of "virtuosity for its own sake" and his criticism of performers who do not follow his instructions carefully, his playing seems to have been consistently slightly underrated in most parameters by the student listeners. Casadesus' fast speed, articulation choices and especially the re-mastered recording of rather lesser quality may have contributed to some lack of enthusiasm for his recording. The responses relating to recordings, tonal clarity and structural coherence which are quite closely correlated support this. Long cannot be criticized for her fast tempo as the score recommends a tempo of crotchet = M.M. 168. Her tempo fluctuations, however, are less authentic.

The role that a group of listeners might play in developing individual performer's interpretation of a work through the guided study of performance in a group teaching setting is highlighted through this preliminary study. At the same

time, directed consideration of performance choices may be effective in developing refined listening skills. Although the data discussed here is descriptive, by taking it into account, the performer preparing the piece is encouraged to look outwards and develop an interpretation with the reception of the listener in mind. Attention is also called to the way in which traditional methods of studying performance may be combined with empirical methods as an enhancement of performance training, whether in the classroom or private studio. Discussing the factors that guide the listener's hearing of a work can help to focus performance preparation, directing attention to the effect that particular interpretative choices might have on the listener.

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Christine Logan, pianist and musicologist, studied with Elizabeth Kozma in Sydney and Béla Siki in USA, gaining the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from U Cincinnati in 1988. As soloist and chamber musician she has performed extensively in Australia, in US and Canada and recorded the complete two piano music of Frank Martin for ABC Classics with Julie Adam (2005). She has published on aspects of Australian music including with UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, *Revised New Grove Dictionary, Companion to Australian Music and Dance, Soundscapes of Australia*, (Ashgate), and on aspects of Fauré and Martin.

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Table 11: Touch and articulation

Touch and articulation	Casadesus	Perlemuter	Long	Lefébure
Mean	5.5	6.98	6.28	6.84
S.D.	1.5	0.76	1.69	1.26

Table 12: Structure

Structure	Casadesus	Perlemuter	Long	Lefébure
Mean	5.57	6.76	6	6.47
S.D.	1.57	1.21	1.45	1.17

Table 13: Impressions of 4 Interpretations of Gabriel Faure: *Impromptu no. 5, Op. 102*

Pianist	R. Casadesus	V. Perlemuter	M. Long	Y. Lefébure
Tempo	168 = crotchet Quite steady	144 = crotchet slightly fluctuating	176 = crotchet somewhat fluctuating with retards and accelerations	154 = crotchet slightly fluctuating
Duration	1'59"	2'25"	1'51"	2'12"
Structure	Clear	Quite clear	Clear but Covered by Pedal at 106	Clear Delineated by tempo nuance at 106
Recording	Slightly reverberant and Distant	Clear, somewhat dry	Poor clarity, Considerable surface noise	Excellent clarity
Tone quality and melodic inflection	Melodic line shaped and inflected. Coloured by pedal producing a 'covered sound.'	Inflection of melody quite similar. Strong accents give an impression of heaviness.	Thin, clear, brilliant focused tone quality. Melody slightly inflected.	Melodic line shaped and inflected through accents
Dynamic range	Moderate, p to f	Moderate, p to f	Wider range, p to ff, more <i>crescendi</i>	Moderate, p to f
Clarity	High	High	Moderate - affected by recording	Very high
Pedalling	Lightly pedalled	Lightly pedalled	Pedalled, some light blurring in <i>crescendi</i>	Transparent, pedalled inaudibly
Touch/ articulation	Lyrical approach to melody and active non-legato touch on continuous semiquavers	Fast attack on melody notes and a more passive attack on continuous semiquavers	Fast attack, brilliant non- legato touch	Lyrical approach to melody and light, even attack on continuous semiquavers

Appendix 2: Questionnaire: Gabriel Fauré - Impromptu no 5, Op. 102

A. FROM THE SCORE

In terms of the decisions the performer has to make in realizing a performance of this piece, rank the following musical parameters in order of importance. Number the parameters in order from 1-6 where 1 is the least important and 6 is the most important.

- Choice of tempo
- Choice of touch and articulation
- Choice of dynamic range
- Structure and shaping of phrase
- Concept of the piece, expressive content/overall approach
- Other considerations – please identify

B. PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

On a scale of 1-9, compare each of the performance in terms of the parameters and assign a number between 1 and 9 where 1 is the lowest rank, 9 is the highest rank and 5 is an intermediate rank.

Parameters:

- Tone quality of the playing 1- Least focused 9 – Most focused
- Tone quality of the playing 1 – Least clear 9 – Most clear
- Tempo : 1 Slowest 9 - fastest
- Tempo nuance: uses tempo inflections 1 Never 9 Most frequently
- Touch, articulation: 1 Least articulated - 9 Most articulated
- Dynamic: 1 Very soft - 9 Very loud
- Dynamic nuance: 1 Least - 9 Most
- Recording quality
- 1 Poor - 9 Excellent
- Structure: 1 - Inaudible - 9 Most audible

Overall impression – rate the performance on the scale

1 Least successful - 9 Most successful

Which factor(s) most influenced your preference?

Other important parameters – please identify