

PETIT LIED

Henri Mulet

Harpichord News

by Larry Palmer

The Harpsichord Repertoire in the 20th Century: *Petit Lied* by Henri Mulet

As detailed in THE DIAPASON for August 2010, a most observant reader, Thomas Annand of Ottawa, brought the existence of a short piece for harpsichord by French composer Henri Mulet to my attention. I had not been aware, previously, of these two pages published in 1910 “for harpsichord (or piano),” but a check of listings in Grove Music Online, a query to Rollin Smith, a referral

to Stephen Best (whose organ arrangement of *Petit Lied* graced the last page of *The American Organist* for August 2010), and Best’s subsequent scan of the original harpsichord score have made it possible for us to share this addition to the early 20th-century harpsichord repertoire with our readers.

Thanks to all who asked the questions and provided the answers. Now all of us in the harpsichord community may enjoy Mulet’s “Little Song” as this lovely “noel” attains its 100th birthday!

On Teaching

by Gavin Black

Boëllmann *Suite Gothique*, Part 4: *Prière à Notre-Dame*

Last month I wrote of the *Menuet Gothique* as an especially tuneful piece, one that I often find myself whistling or humming as I walk along. The next movement of the *Suite Gothique*—*Prière à Notre-Dame*—is also one in which the treble melody is a large part of the artistic effect of the piece. However, the mood of the piece is as different as can be, and the implications of the shape and nature of the treble melody for the act of learning the piece are also largely different.

Texture

In the *Menuet*, the treble melody should be practiced all by itself, as a single line, and then accompanied just by the bass line. This is both because of the essential tuneful nature of that melody, and because all of the other notes—the inner voices, so to speak, though they are not by and large organized as voices—serve primarily to reinforce the harmonies and rhythms of the melody. This approach to practicing the *Menuet* strikes me as being the equivalent for this piece of practicing the separate voices and pairs of voices of a fugue or other contrapuntal piece.

Looking at the texture of the *Prière*, it strikes me that the essential element is *the whole texture itself*. That is, the treble melody seems to float on the bed of the pedal and inner-voice chords in a way that is essential to the nature and effect of that melody. This is of course a subjective analysis. Perhaps it is supported by the somewhat odd fact that the composer has emphatically not “solo’d out” the melody. For almost all of the piece, both hands are meant to be on the same keyboard, sometimes the *Récit*, sometimes the *Grand Orgue*. And this is in spite of the fact that as early as the first measure the treble line encroaches upon a note being held by the inner voices, forcing at least a brief departure from the legato with which that inner

voice would otherwise be played. (Only near the end of the movement, when Boëllmann has the treble melody briefly swoop down low and then continue to cross the [fairly high] left-hand chords, does he ask that the two hands play on separate keyboards.) If I am right about this, or more meaningfully, if any other player, teacher, or student also wants to see it this way, that would suggest that practicing separate components—right hand, left hand, pedal—while almost certainly still a good idea and indeed still quite important, would serve primarily a *technical* rather than a *musical* function.

(A practical consequence of this idea: when practicing separate voices or one melody for the purpose of learning it musically, it is normal to use a fingering that is specifically *not* the fingering that will be used in learning the notes. When practicing separate components for technical reasons it is crucial to use the fingering that *will* be used in learning the notes.)

In the *Menuet*, the rather jaunty melody is presented as the upper line of a series of chords in the right hand, marked *non legato*. The notion of practicing the top line of notes, the melody, all by itself comes from the desire to allow the ear to engage with that melody as easily as possible. The nature of the melody and the *non legato* instruction from the composer then allow the fingering and execution of the melody and its chords to be performed in a technically very natural way. Each chord can be given whatever fingering feels most comfortable to the player, based primarily on hand position, and the transition from one such comfortable position to the next can be practiced. The situation with the *Prière* is almost exactly the opposite of all of this. The treble melody is a single line, not the upper note of a series of chords. In 45 out of the 55 measures of the piece, the upper line can be played all by itself in the right hand while the left hand takes care of the other manual notes. This is not always necessarily the

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Example 1



best fingering by any means, though it often is. This line is clearly meant to be played *legato*. There is no overall articulation instruction at the beginning of this movement, however the melody exists under long slurs—some one measure, some two, a few slightly longer. This movement, marked *Très lent* at the beginning and *Animato* later, has no metronome marking, whereas all three of the other movements do. While pieces with metronome markings are certainly not meant to be played “metronomically,” and pieces without them certainly do not have to be played very freely, this state of affairs at least suggests the possibility that the composer meant for this piece to be freer or more fluid rhythmically than the other movements.

Meanwhile, whereas the pedal line in the *Menuet* is quite active and, just as a matter of note-learning, rather challenging, the pedal line in the *Prière* is slow-moving throughout and simple. Its note patterns could be learned by someone who had started pedal-playing that month, perhaps that week. (Furthermore, 49 of the 72 notes of the pedal line are on raised keys, which helps! In the *Menuet* it is eleven notes out of 165.) However, the *non legato* of the pedal line in the *Menuet* allows the player to address each note with the most comfortable (part of a) foot and, by and large, simply move from one note to the next. The *legato* of the *Prière* requires a different kind of planning and practicing.

Hand and fingering choices

So, what do any of these observations tell us about mapping out, practicing, and learning the piece? First of all, except in those few measures where the composer has done this for us—mm. 36–42 and the last two measures—the first task in the manual part is to work out which hand will play which notes. This is always the case, of course, unless the piece has been set up by the composer to be on two manuals. The first consideration is always this: what distribution between the hands makes it easiest and therefore most reliable for the fingers to get to the notes? In this piece, this should be supplemented by an awareness of the need to make the melody *legato* as indicated by the slurs, or, to put it perhaps more accurately, by an awareness of the implications of handing choices for the legato of all of the lines.

The beginning of the piece already provides opportunities to think about hand choices and other aspects of technical planning, as well as interpretation (Example 1). In the first measure, the dotted half-note E-flat on the fourth beat can be reached by either hand. Any player, but especially one with small hands, might want to take that note in the right hand. (Playing the entire chord in the left hand could create tension in the outer part of the left hand.) That would, however, make it harder, or more involved, to make the transition from the third to the fourth beats in the treble voice completely legato.

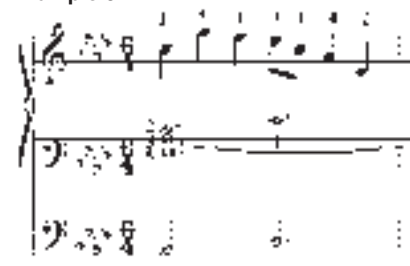
Here are some possible fingerings for that moment in the piece (Examples 2, 3, 4, 5), and there are many others. (In this and other fingering examples I have omitted the slurs and other markings to make more room for the fingering numbers.)

In mm. 5–6, the notes that are printed

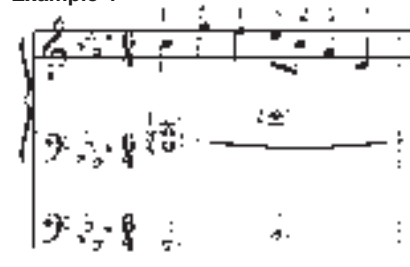
Example 2



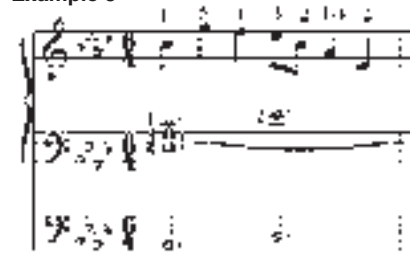
Example 3



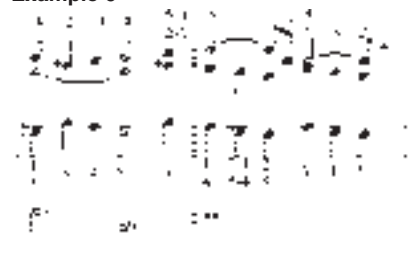
Example 4



Example 5



Example 6



as the lower of two voices in the upper staff can be played by either hand. Of course those eight notes do not all have to be played by the same hand. Here is one way to divide the notes between the hands (Example 6).

There are, as usual, several other ways to do it. This one in particular is designed in part to minimize the extent to which the thumbs play black notes, and in part to feel comfortable. Of course, in general it is a good idea to keep the thumbs off of black notes, as I have discussed in other columns. However, in a piece written in a key with four flats, of course it will not be possible to accomplish this completely. It is also not necessary to be absolute about it, especially when all of the notes in one hand at a given moment are on black

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keys, as in the left hand in m. 1 above. Students should try several possibilities, especially in spots where the notes are all close enough on the keyboard that many of them could go into either hand, and make choices.

Interpretive/technical points

There are two interesting interpretive/technical points that arise in the opening measures. In m. 1 at the sixth quarter-note, the treble melody plays a note that is being held by an inner voice, probably in the left hand. There is one simple basic answer to what to do here: release the dotted half-note and play the quarter-note in the treble melody. It is fairly clear that the playing of this treble note is more important than the holding of the last quarter-note's worth or so of the longer note. Of course this is not a rigorous, scientific truth. Some players might feel that holding the long note is more important, here, or, more likely, in various other places in the repertoire where this type of conflict arises. A student can certainly try it both ways: the holding of the long note, combined with the correct timing of the release of the treble A-flat might give an illusion that a new E-flat is being played at that moment. This illusion might or might not be convincing.

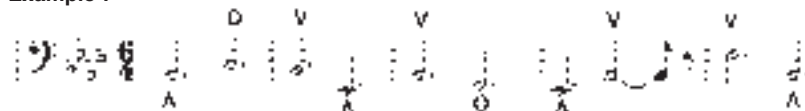
If the player is going to choose to release the E-flat and play it again on the sixth quarter-note, then it is important to do it the right way. To start with, it is only the inner voice E-flat that must be released early. It is surprisingly easy to borrow this release for the other voice that is involved: that is to release, in this case, the treble A-flat early, with the inner voice E-flat. This creates a discontinuity that is unnecessary and that is probably responsible for giving the whole phenomenon of voices bumping into each other like this a bad name! In fact, if the dotted half-note E-flat is released appropriately early, then the treble line can be played exactly as if it were the only thing being played, with whatever articulation and timing that implies. It is also important

that the note be released as lightly and gently as possible. After all, the real goal is to release it without the listener even knowing that it is gone. It is better to release a note in this situation a little bit earlier than absolutely necessary than to release it abruptly. If the note being released draws attention to itself by snapping off, then the other voice will not sound *cantabile* or *legato*, no matter how it itself is played. It is important that the held note and the newly played E-flat be played with different fingers. This is of course accomplished automatically if they are in different hands.

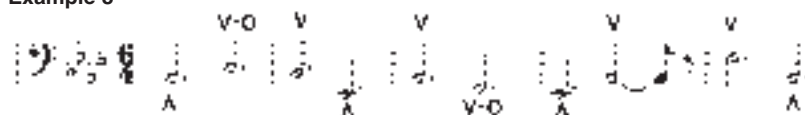
Then in m. 2, moving from the third quarter-note beat to the fourth, the inner voice takes over a note—D-flat—that has just been played by the treble melody. In this case, in order actually to play the inner voice D-flat, it is necessary to release the treble note early, breaking the *legato* of the upper voice. Again, the way that this is done can affect how disruptive it is: if different fingers are used, and the release of the treble eighth-note is made lightly and gently, then the interruption of the *legato* will be minimal, perhaps not really noticeable to a listener. There are also a couple of other possibilities. The treble eighth-note could be tied to the (no longer really) new dotted half-note D-flat. Or the three-note left-hand chord can be arpeggiated, thereby delaying the upper note of that chord and removing the conflict between that note and the upper voice. In general we do not necessarily think of arpeggiating chords or staggering notes on the organ, except as instructed to do so by the composer. However, the aesthetic of this movement suggests to me that this could be appropriate not only at this spot, where it also helps to solve a specific problem, but also elsewhere, where it might support a gentle flowing feeling in the piece. Of course this is quite a subjective interpretive choice, but something that a student can ponder.

This kind of analysis of the effect of hand and fingering decisions on the interpretive impact of the performance of

Example 7



Example 8



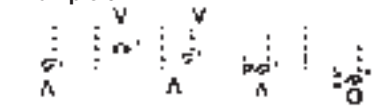
the piece can be carried out throughout the *Prière*. This movement reveals itself to be perhaps the most complicated of the four movements of the *Suite* in this respect, and the one requiring the most meticulous work; though, because it is a fairly slow movement and because the pedal line is not virtuosic, it is probably not the most difficult in performance for most players.

Pedal line

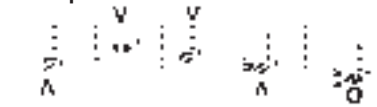
The pedal line is, as I mentioned above, slow-moving and fairly simple. There are, as always, various possibilities for pedaling. A basic pedaling for the beginning might look like that shown in Example 7. It should be noted that Böellmann in this piece only asks for the use of the swell pedal at times when the pedal part is on low sustained notes, as in m. 8 or m. 11, or during rests. In the above example, the main thing that could be different is the use of some same-foot substitutions for students who would rather strike notes initially with the toe (Example 8).

I myself would probably do the first of these substitutions but not the second. There are also places in the piece—mm. 6–8, mm. 25–29—where both-foot substitution is necessary to preserve complete legato. In this passage (Example 9), the student can listen to the difference between the strict legato created with the help of the indicated substitution and the slight articulation that would result from this pedaling (Example 10).

Example 9



Example 10



Practicing

As always, the practicing of separate components is crucial to the learning of the piece. After hand assignments, fingering, and pedaling have been worked out, the student should practice pedals, including the choreography of the swell pedal where it is indicated, and separate hands, as much as is needed: that is, until each of those components is absolutely secure. My guess is that with this particular texture, the first step in putting things together should be the two hands together, and that this can be followed by adding the pedals (again, assuming that each of these components is very well learned). That is, I think that practicing each hand separately with pedal is not as important here as it is with some pieces. Of course there is no harm in doing some of it. Everything should be kept slow enough to feel easy. Since the final tempo is not meant to be fast—*très lent*—the process of speeding up to tempo should happen naturally and fairly easily, but should not ever be rushed.

Next month I will return to the Buxtehude *Praeludium in E Major*, looking at some contrapuntal and some non-contrapuntal sections. ■

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