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### French Influences on American Improvisational Practices in the 20th Century

Improvisation in the United States today owes much to the French tradition. At the end of the 19th century, improvisation in America was generally poorly executed and almost never done in concert (only in church services). However, Alexandre Guilmant and Marcel Dupré's extensive US tours, which included numerous improvisations, symbolize a turning point in American attitudes towards *extempore* playing. These two French organists, perhaps more than any others of their day, had a profound influence on generations of American organists and changed forever the way Americans would approach improvisation.

Everett E. Truette was publisher of a monthly journal titled *The Organ*, which ran from 1892 to 1894. It provides valuable insight into American views on organ playing around at the end of the 19th century. For instance, the recital programs of American organists published in *The Organ* would seem to imply that Americans rarely improvised. The September 1893 issue outlines twelve programs given by Clarence Eddy, George E. Whiting, W. C. Carl, and Louis Falk at various churches in Chicago and New York. Of the twelve programs, only Louis Falk included one "Improvisation on National Airs." However, absence of improvisation in recital programs implies only that Americans were unaccustomed to improvising in a concert setting.

In contrast, an anonymous article from the November 1893 issue reveals not the absence of improvisation in America, but that it is done too often (and incompetently) during the church service:

Every young organist should study *extempo* [original spelling] playing and he who devotes considerable time to perfection himself in this branch of his work may rest assured that as his ability to improvise increases so will he be better fitted to fulfil [original spelling] the duties of a church organist; but - and it is a good-sized but - it is only a step when this ability to improvise becomes a downright nuisance by being forced upon one's hearers on every possible occasion. Imagine the weariness of listening to improvisation, be it ever so fine, for preludes, interludes, response, and postlude, twice a day for forty consecutive Sundays. Does any organist serve such a diet to his hearers? Most certainly. There are dozens of organists who do not play a piece of printed music for preludes or postlude year after year. The writer well remembers attending service at a different church every Sunday morning and evening for nearly six months, during which time only three organ pieces and five arrangements were heard.

Let your congregation hear the works of good composers, even selecting simple compositions if necessary, and remember

that good improvising is as much a treat as little-neck clams;  
but, like the clams, it must be served sparingly, else it becomes a  
bore.

Therefore, it would seem that at the end of the 19th century, Americans reserved improvisation almost exclusively for the church service, but the general level of ability remained low.

There was at least one institution in the US that was training organists to improvise. The March 1894 issue of *The Organ* describes the courses offered at the New England Conservatory in Boston as a two-semester sequence, but is short on details, except to say that instruction is led by Dr. Percy Goetschius of the Stuttgart Conservatory.

Other issues of *The Organ* reveal a clear American fascination for the French tradition. Nearly every issue during the first two years of publication contains a "Paris Newsletter" from an anonymous correspondent, known only by "Outre Mer." The only other country to have a regular correspondent was England, but the "London Letter" appears far less frequently than its Paris counterpart.

The "Paris Newsletter" in the March 1883 issue focuses particularly on the difference between French and American improvisational practices. In contrast to American organists, the French rarely improvise during the church service. Rather, they include a mix of repertoire from Bach to modern composers:

Nothing has impressed me more in listening to Guilmant, Widor, Dubois, and other organists here, than their wonderful facility in improvising, and at the same time the comparative rarity with which they make use of this power. I have now been in Paris three months, and during that time Guilmant has played, I should say, about six fugues of Bach as *sorties*, and several works of Handel, Mendelssohn, Lemmens, etc. His other pieces, such as elevations and prayers, he has improvised.

After praising Guilmant's originality, perfection of form, and contrapuntal skill, the anonymous author continues to say:

The comparison between [Guilmant's] style of organ playing and that of many of our American organists (and that, too, often of so-called famous ones) is too obvious to need development. [...] The plain truth is, that our American organists are too often lazy, and the musical taste of the people who hear them is not yet sufficiently cultivated, so insist upon their doing their duty. For it is much easier to dribble out a solo on the clarinet, with a rambling, incoherent accompaniment, and an occasional kick at the pedals, than it is to waste the organ music of Bach, Mendelssohn and Händel, and the effective music, written expressly for the church service, of more modern composers. I

speaking thus strongly on this point because the more familiar I become with the French organists, the *more I see how inferior to them we are in America*. [italics my own] No improvement can be made in our national school, till musical opinion insists that organists shall not extemporize except in form; let it be free, if you will, but in some form. And first of all (and this is Guilmant's own advice), let every young organist devote himself to the organ works of the great masters, and then, using them as models, in time and with study he will be able to extemporize all that is necessary for church use."

Thus, in 1893, awareness of the deficiencies of American organists regarding improvisation was growing, if only slowly. In addition, the primary venue for *extempore* playing was still the church service, not the concert hall. Guilmant and Dupré's US tours had not yet shown American audiences the possibilities inherent in concert improvisation.

Most of the "Paris Newsletters" center around praising the activities of Guilmant. The May 1893 issue states, "

For a *sortie* [Guilmant] improvised a fugue in the most wonderful style. The fugue had a quick, flowing subject, ending with a trill, and when he came to the stretto it was impossible to conceive how he kept the subject straight in the different voices,

to say nothing of the execution. Long life to Guilmant ! for I don't see who is to succeed him when he is dead.

The issue from April 1893 contains an extensive biography of Guilmant, while other issues cover his 1893 or 1894 North American tours in great detail; in one case a reporter shadowed Guilmant for several days, commenting on seemingly insignificant details and quoting him extensively, illustrating just how fascinated Americans were with this French virtuoso.

The published programs in *The Organ* reveal that Guilmant almost always programmed an "Improvisation on a theme to be submitted" as the second to last piece on a recital. In fact, of the 40 recitals he played at the Chicago World's Fair in 1904, 21 improvisations were included (usually alternating about every other concert) and every single one was placed second to last. What was it about this location on a program that appealed to Guilmant so much? Perhaps he wanted the audience to remember his improvisation by having it late in the program, but felt a piece a repertoire would leave a better final impression. Or perhaps his improvisations tended to be subdued in character, which contrasted well with the often more showy finales. In contrast, Dupré often placed his improvisations last on the program, which would take entire second half if he improvised a full symphony.

Contrary to Robert Delastre's comment in his book *L'Oeuvre de Marcel Dupré*,<sup>1</sup> in which he states that Guilmant only improvised for the inauguration

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<sup>1</sup> Delastre, Robert. *L'oeuvre de Marcel Dupré*. Paris: Ed. Musique sacrée, 1952.

of a new organ, the published programs in *The Organ* show that Guilmant did indeed include numerous improvisations at concerts that were not inaugural events. For instance, Guilmant improvised on recitals at the New Old South Church in Boston on September 25 and 26, 1894, neither of which were inaugurations. And let us not forget his improvisations during the church services at La Trinité.

Guilmant's influence on American organists grew even stronger when William C. Carl founded the Guilmant Organ School in 1899 New York City. With Guilmant as president, the school would help to shape a generation of American students. The foundation of the school itself is testament to the importance of Guilmant's teaching in the minds of American organists at the end of the 19th century. Surely this reverence for Guilmant included an awareness of his improvisational skill. As Wayne Leupold writes, "From contemporary accounts Guilmant's ability to improvise seems to have stood alone among organists of that time and to have commanded the respect and the wonder of the world. Everywhere his improvisations held audiences spellbound."<sup>2</sup>

American's awe for French improvisers made even more prominent by the extensive US tours of Marcel Dupré. In 1920, Rodman Wanamaker sent Alexander Russel to Europe to gather ideas on organ building and bring back new compositions. Russel had already agreed to present Charles Courboin in a

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<sup>2</sup> Leupold, Wayne. *The Organ Music of Alexandre Guilamnt, Volume VII, First Sonata*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 1990.

series of recitals at the NY Wanamaker store, so he probably did not intend to recruit Dupré. However, at Widor's insistence, Russel reluctantly agreed to have Dupré play his American debut at the New York store. It is interesting to note that Russel's uncertainty stemmed from worries regarding Dupré's all-Bach recitals: "We can't take him [Dupré] on if he never plays anything but Bach. That is admirable. But much too austere for us [Americans]."<sup>3</sup> This quote also provides insight into American's musical tastes around 1920.

The American press stoked the public's anticipation leading up to Dupré's US premiere, calling it, "an event without parallel in the history of the organ in America."<sup>4</sup> On November 18, 1921 Dupré played his first recital at the New York Wanamaker store to a crowd of 1300. After intermission, it was revealed that Dupré would improvise a formal symphony in four movements on themes given a moment before. This was feat never before attempted, not even by Guilman. After extensive details regarding the improvisation itself, Edward Shippen Barnes summarized, "The applause and appreciation after this number left no doubt of the profound effect produced upon a very musical audience by the artist's skill [...]."

On December 8 of that same year, Dupré would again improvise on what was then the world's largest organ at the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia. (Ironically, this was the same organ, substantially enlarged, that George A.

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, Michael. *Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist*. Lebanon, N. H. : The University Press of New England, 1985

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.77



Audsley had designed for the 1904 Columbia Exposition in Chicago, the organ which Guilmant played his famous 40 recitals on, never once repeating a piece, and improvising 21 times. The same pipes therefore served both these French masters of improvisation!) Dupré's second symphonic improvisation in Philadelphia would result in the *Passion Symphony*, Op. 21, transcribed three years later on the ship returning to Europe from his 1924 tour. Michael Murray writes, "As he later wrote, having received among the themes four Gregorian melodies - *Jesus Redemptor*, *Adeste Fideles*, *Stabat Mater*, and *Adoro Te* - 'I had in a flash the vision of a symphony in four movements.'" Murray continues to say that Dupré almost always closed his US concerts with an improvisation on submitted themes.<sup>5</sup>

American audiences could not get enough of Dupré. He would return for a total of four concert tours in 1921, 1922, 1923, and 1924, sometimes playing a concert every day, barely leaving time for transportation. His first three tours included over 200 symphonic improvisations, not to mention improvisations in other forms. Murray writes that "Not Jenny Lind, Anton Rubinstein, Rachmaninoff, or Paderewski had conjured greater enthusiasm," on their American tours.<sup>6</sup>

Dupré published his two improvisation treatises in 1925, symbolizing the culmination of French improvisational practice up to that point. That same year,

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, Michael. *Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist*. Lebanon, N. H. : The University Press of New England, 1985. p.94

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94

American organists began to congregate in Paris for lesson with Dupré.<sup>7</sup> For those unable to study with him in person, the two treatises represented the possibility for a connection with the French tradition. Like Guilman twenty years earlier, Americans were once again captivated by a French virtuoso through his US tours. Part of this fascination was surely due to their improvisational ability, and the near-absence of formal improvisational training in the US, New England Conservatory, however, being a notable exception.

From humble beginnings at the end of the 19th century, American improvisational practice was fostered by the French tradition and the examples set by Guilman and Dupré. These two organists led the way not only by their US tours, but also by their extensive pedagogical work. The list of American students who studied with either Guilman, at the Guilman School in New York, or with Dupré would include some of the most prominent American organists in the 20th century. While interest in improvisation was sparked by these two great artists, it would take several more decades for organ improvisation to gain a place among a majority of American institutions. Whether improvisation will ever be valued at the same level as repertoire, as Dupré advocated, remains to be seen. Fortunately, Guilman and Dupré can still serve as examples, through their published repertoire, writings, and treatises, for those eager to learn the art of improvisation today.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.107