Organ Teaching at the Paris Conservatoire

by David McCarthy

After a prolonged low point in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, French organ music (both performance and composition) quickly reached a high level of development by the early 20th century. Especially in the field of improvisation, French organists have for 100 years had an extremely good reputation.

What makes this interesting, for an organ teacher, is that all these great musicians studied in one place (Paris), mostly at the Conservatoire (and the other two great organ-teaching schools, the Schola Cantorum, and the Niedermeyer School, were staffed mostly by graduates of the Conservatoire). But how were the French able to pull their organ culture up by its own bootstraps so quickly? I have put together a little history of how the Conservatoire classes were taught, as a source of guidelines for teaching and playing.

The Conservatoire

What is today known officially as the "Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris" has origins that go back to 1795. Its more modern form goes to 1822, though, when Luigi Cherubini was named the director, and instituted many of the traditions still used today. Most famous of these is the prix system, in which each June students compete against their colleagues for the premier prix, which guarantees them a comfortable living in a provincial music school. Those who get a deuxième prix, or a premier or deuxième accessit (in descending order of importance) can try the next year, though at the age of 30 (at some times 35) the student must leave.[1] Many students have prizes in different areas, such as solfège or harmony, in addition to their primary instrument. Of course, there is also the Prix de Rome, which was given from 1803 to

[1] I have not italicized the most frequently used French terms in this paper, for clarity's sake.

1968, and which entitled the winner to two or three years in Rome to compose (there were also Prix de Rome in non-musical arts).

What often goes unremarked (the only time I saw this in my readings was in Hielscher) is that most instruments are taught in classes, not individually; although many students seem to have had private lessons as well, these were often with non-Conservatoire teachers. This is foreign to American and German practice, but in the case of France (where almost every major musician of any kind studied in Paris, and usually at the Conservatoire) the concentration of talent and knowledge in a room several times a week seems to have created a strong and unified school of thought, at least in the case of organ playing. It has perhaps led to a weakening of the "gene pool" in other instruments, however.

The Organ Teachers

François Benoist (at the Conservatoire 1819–1872)

Benoist was the first teacher of organ at the Conservatoire, and began there at a time when the standards for organ playing and composition in France were very low. Organists still played through much of the Mass (starting after the sermon), and in some cases played continuously through, only stopping for the Elevation.[2] Benoist had won a Prix de Rome, and apparently taught some composition as well. His organ students included Franck, Alkan, Lefébure-Wely, Saint-Saëns, and Bizet (who won a premier prix in organ in 1855). Among his other students, who may have taken organ, were Délibes and Massenet.

[2] This practice ended in 1904 with a papal directive; up to that point it had been "de bon ton" to go hear Widor or Vierne play at these services, which were in effect improvisation recitals.

It is hard to get a clear picture of how Benoist was as a teacher, though the standard of his students seems to indicate that he was effective. He was starting with a *tabula rasa* in terms of teaching the instrument, and tinkered with the curriculum over his long tenure. For the first 33 years, the class was exclusively dedicated to improvisation. The forms he used have been remarkably long-lived: plainchant accompaniment, four-part fugue improvisation, and the "thème libre" (free improvisation in a modified sonata form on a given theme) were standards until the 1960s.[3] Since they formed the core of every French organist's education until recently, it is worth going into some detail with them.

The plainchant (often called, confusingly, the "choral") accompaniment was at first "dans la tradition française," with the cantus firmus in the bass (it is not clear whether this always meant on the pedals), and three voices above it in florid free counterpoint. This may have been preceded by a four-part note-against-note texture in some cases. After 1851, the student was required to first present the cantus in the bass, then in the soprano transposed up an 11^{th}.[4] According to examples given by Benoist's student Paul Wachs, these settings contained "a mixture of tonal and modal progressions, and the systematic use of suspensions, resulting in a dissonance at the arrival of each note of the cantus firmus."[5]

The four-voice fugue was a "fugue d'école," which followed a more or less strict form: only the exposition was in four voices; no consistently used countersubject was

[3] The free improvisation section was added in 1843. Jutten, 84.
[4] Jutten, 83.
[5] "Un mélange d'enchainements tonaux et modaux, et un emploi systématique de retards provoquant une dissonance a l'arrivée de chaque nouvelle note thématique." Jutten, 84.

expected; entries always had to be in outer voices.[6] Usually, a stretto was expected toward the end. Later teachers, especially Dupré, were to codify more precisely some of the requirements of the fugue (and the free improvisation; see below). The fugue theme given to the students was often not appropriate to contrapuntal manipulation (for instance, not being susceptible to stretto), and the same tune by Cherubini was used each year from 1855–1857 (and a half-dozen other times around then), which shows perhaps a lack of attention on the jury's part.[7]

In the "free improvisation," the form was almost as strict: a sonata form with a one-theme exposition, a bridge, the exposition repeated in the dominant, development, and a recapitulation in the tonic.[8] The tunes used in the classroom were generally from Classical symphonies or operas (Benoist liked Haydn and Mozart), but at the examination students were often presented with popular tunes from operettas.

In 1848, organ was officially put in Section VII, along with harmony and composition, but soon thereafter (1852) Benoist began teaching repertoire as well as improvisation. At first, all students had to play at least one fugue for the concours, and after 1867, it had to be a fugue by Bach.[9] Though he is a little shadowy, it is apparent that Benoist kept improving his course, and by the time of Franck it was in essentially its classic form.

César Franck (1872–1890)

In his own concours attempt at the Conservatoire (in 1841), Franck (1822–1890) only got a deuxième prix, apparently because he superimposed the given chant theme and

[6] Jutten, 84.
[7] Jutten, 84.
[8] Jutten, 84.
[9] Jutten, 85.

the free theme in the free improvisation, which irritated the judges. Franck was a born composer unable to rein in his fertile imagination, and the pattern continued when he took over from Benoist in 1872: in a sense, the organ class became a composition class, taught by a composer frustrated by lack of recognition. It attracted Debussy, among other non-organists, and Franck taught Chausson composition privately.[10] He was apparently a magnetic and loving teacher, who inspired warm memories in all of his students.[11]

Franck's class met three times per week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, from 8 to 10 a.m.; five of the six hours were devoted to improvisation—the same three forms that Benoist had developed. For the free improvisation, Franck got around the arbitrary and anti-sonata condition of using only one melody, by "subtly introducing a new element at the moment of transition to the dominant, an element which could serve later in the development, or by the intensive cultivation in the development of a new theme suggested by a fragment of the given theme. Inversion was cultivated vigorously as was the change of rhythm; or an ostinato pattern used with a definite intention and taken from a fragment of the theme; or a variety and subtlety of harmonization."[12] His approach to the fugue was "essentially classical, but expanded"[13] and "he was particularly interested in the construction of the episodes."[14] He never used a text in his class.

Franck made some other alterations to the course over his time at the Conservatoire: both the fugue subjects and the free themes were now specially composed

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[10] According to Tournemire, when the class met at Franck's home, there were usually 30 auditors in addition to the 8 students. Ochse, 159.
[11] Franck liked teaching so much that, when his students were late to class, he "went to recruit … students from the class next door, " according to Pierné, quoted in Smith, 158.
[12] Vierne, 24.
[13] Tournemire, 70.
[14] Vierne, 24.

for the concours, instead of being taken from literature, and starting in 1879 actual plainchants were used, instead of newly composed ones.[15]

There were some important organ topics that weren't covered, though: for example, Franck never talked about registration. Vierne wrote later: "I confess that … I did not really know the harmonic difference between a Plein jeu and a Cornet, and much less between a Nasard and a Quinte."[16] At the examinations for prepared pieces (and the students would learn only their exam pieces, usually a Bach work, over the course of the year), Franck would handle all the registration changes, including operating the swell pedal![17] Henri Busser later wrote: "it is true to say that the teaching of technique was rather neglected – notably pedal study. One prepared works of Bach and Handel for the examinations but most of the time was devoted to [improvisation]."[18]

Charles-Marie Widor (1890–1896)

After Franck died of pleurisy, possibly connected to an accident with a street car, Widor (1844–1937) was asked to take over the organ class, which he did reluctantly, because his career as composer and performer was active. Widor took the job seriously, however, and made needed changes. The students were at first very hostile to him, because of their extreme devotion to Franck, and the feeling that Widor was unimpressed with how the class had been run (at his first meeting with them, Widor gave an interesting speech detailed by Louis Vierne, in which, among other things, he said "in France, all too often performance is neglected for improvisation."[19]).

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[15] Jutten, 85.
[16] Vierne, 40.
[17] Vierne, 40.
[18] Quoted in Smith, 164.
[19] Vierne, 28 et seq.

Widor had the class spend most of its time on repertoire.[20] Most of that repertoire was Bach, to whom Widor traced his organ-playing lineage through Lemmens, Hesse, and Forkel. He insisted on technical ease: "correct posture and economy of movement was vital: knees were to form a right angle with the thighs, and heels and knees were to be kept joined together as far as possible for security."[21] Widor was very logical about articulation and registration/manual changes (he didn't like frequent changes of registration), taking into account the acoustics of the room (which Forkel reported that Bach had always done). [22] He believed that tempo changes should either steadily accelerate or decelerate, and used the image of locomotive pistons as a metaphor for the beat.[23]

Widor tried to open his students to historical research and performance practice,[24] taking into account the limitations of Baroque instruments (at least in registration; it seems to have been accepted that a smooth legato was the ideal for all organ music). He didn't allow them to use heavy reeds (and sometimes none at all) in Bach's preludes and fugues.

Improvisation wasn't entirely neglected, of course. Though Widor told the class that "he had nothing fundamental to change in what Franck had taught them about

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[20] Quoted in Vierne, 29: "Je ne vois pas pourquoi l'organiste serait le seul artiste exempté de la nécessité de connaître entièrement la littérature de l'instrument qu'il pratique." ("I don't see why the organist should be the only artist exempted from the necessity of thoroughly knowing the literature for the instrument he practices.") He never let them play his own pieces for exams, though. (Thomson, 54.)

[21] Thomson, 47.

[22] Thomson, 48.

[23] Quoted in Thomson, 47–48: "Would you like a lesson in rhythm? Listen to those immense locomotives dragging behind them tons of merchandise: admire the formidable piston stroke which marks every recurrence of the accent, slowly but relentlessly. Well may believe that you hear the march of Fate itself. It causes one to shudder."

[24] Quoted in Thomson, 52: "I cannot understand an ignorant musician. Everything which belongs to the intellectual world is intimately bound up: music has definite connections with painting, sculpture, literature, and even the exact sciences, mathematics, geometry, algebra and acoustics."

improvisation,"[25] and kept to the same three forms,[26] there were a few differences. Widor had the students work from tunes in the repertoire, not his own (Franck had composed new themes for every class). He seems to have emphasized "structure and logical development,"[27] rather than interesting harmonic tricks.

We do have an account of a Widor class. Fannie Edgar Thomas, a musical columnist, "recorded that the two-and-a-half hour class contained performances of Bach, improvisations on a Beethoven theme, work on aspects of service playing, analyses of some Bach chorales, discussion of registration problems, and a critique of an original piece by one of the students. It is possible that Widor included a sampling of everything in his course for the benefit of the American journalist."[28] At the end of his sixth year in the organ class (among his students were Vierne and Tournemire, who had started with Franck, and Dupré), Widor became a composition professor at the Conservatoire, where he taught Honegger, Milhaud, and Varèse, the last-named having particularly fond memories of him.

Alexandre Guilmant (1896–1911)

Guilmant (1837–1911), like Franck and Widor, was already a famous concert organist and composer when he took over the class. In 1894 he had (with Bordes and d'Indy) started the Schola Cantorum, meant to revive Gregorian chant and 16th-century

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[25] Tournemire, 49. Also Jutten, 86: "…son enseignement de l'improvisation reste relativement proche des conceptions franckistes, sur le plan formel sinon esthétique." ("his teaching of improvisation stayed relatively close to the Franckist conception, on the formal level if not the esthetic").

[26] Though the forms look arbitrary and academic to us now, and perhaps even harmful to a real artist, those who went through the system seem to have appreciated the discipline, perhaps agreeing with Widor that (regarding the schematic fugue d'école) "Such is the classic plan, that nobody, however, will force you to adopt. When one gives it to one's students, it is to spare them the pain of finding another, and of losing time in doing so." Jean Bouvard, 3 (quoting Widor): "Tel est le plan classique, que personne, d'ailleurs, ne vous force d'adopter. Quand on le propose aux étudiants, c'est pour leur épargner la peine d'en chercher un autre et de perdre leur temps dans cette recherche."

[27] Tournemire, 48.

[28] Ochse, 190–1.

counterpoint, to use those styles as inspiration for new works, and to train organists for the liturgy.[29] Guilmant's students at the Schola were not as famous as those at the Conservatoire, but his activity there (and more indirectly in the founding in1899 of the Guilmant Organ School in New York, which became a training ground for many American organists) does seem to show that he was interested in excellent liturgical playing.

At the Conservatoire, he made no very noticeable changes in how the class was run. He did, however, allow students to play his own music. According to Vierne, he "didn't change anything in the technique of execution."[30] Like Widor, Guilmant had studied with Lemmens, and similarly had a dislike of wasted motion, which also meant always preparing the feet.[31] Clarence Dickinson (1873–1969), who studied with Guilmant, Widor, and Vierne, said Guilmant had three main objectives: a perfect legato, so that each voice in a polyphonic piece "sings"; good command of staccato; and a sure and light pedal technique.[32] Orpha Ochse compared Guilmant and his predecessor: "while Widor taught his students general principles of registration, Guilmant could (and did) explain the character and use of each stop. In repertoire and registration Widor tended to become ever more conservative, while Guilmant tended to become more comprehensive and eclectic."[33] Guilmant was one of the first to try to revive the French Classical school; his eclecticism is especially impressive considering his age upon taking the class.

Vierne was not very charitable concerning Guilmant's teaching of improvisation: "he came back purely and simply to teaching only the forms required for the concours …

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[29] Hielscher, 43.
[30] Vierne, 52.
[31] Hielscher, 47.
[32] Hielscher, 50.
[33] Ochse, 196.

his imagination was incomparably less fertile than that of Widor … he seemed retrograde to the students we had already engaged on the path of a more daring modernism."[34] He did, however, succeed in getting the jury to allow a florid counterpoint against the chant (apparently, at that point the standard was homophonic, note-against-note harmonization). The "commentary" on the chant could be now be modal (this could have been a result of his studies of early music); and he made the fugue more "technically rigorous,"[35] though he also didn't insist on a consistent countersubject.[36]

Though he was never the official organ class instructor, **Vierne** was an assistant ("suppléant") to both Widor and Guilmant; in fact, Franck had made Vierne's assistantship a condition of the job for Widor. Vierne taught a preparatory class in plainchant and fugue, and when Guilmant left on his extended American tours, Vierne had control of the actual class, often for months at a time, so it is worth looking at his pedagogy. We have an idea of what Vierne expected at private lessons, from his student Henri Doyen: "…I had to present at each lesson (and in this order): 1) counterpoint homework (which we played several times, together and by individual parts; Vierne, blind, didn't let anything get past!); 2) an organ verset or interlude, on a liturgical theme proposed by the master which I had to write down, and treating it according to my fancy (!), and finally, 3) at least two pages of a work of J.S. Bach and two pages of one or the other of the '24 Pieces'"[37]

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[34] Vierne, 52 ("…il revint purement et simplement à l'enseignement unique des formes requises pour le concours… son imagination était incomparablement moins fertile que celle de Widor… il parut retrograde aux élèves que nous avions engagés dans la voie d'un modernisme plus osé.")
[35] Jutten, 86.
[36] Vierne, 52.
[37] Doyen, 38 ("… je devais donc présenter à chaque leçon (et dans l'ordre suivant) : 1) un devoir de contrepoint (qu'on jouait plusieurs fois, ensemble et détail; Vierne, aveugle, ne passait rien!); 2) un verset ou interlude d'orgue, sur un thème liturgique proposé par le maître que je devais écrire … en le traitant à

Despite what Vierne wrote about Guilmant's teaching of improvisation, he was hugely impressed with him as a musician: "… from my collaboration with Guilmant I received an inestimable profit. His vast experience, his good sense, his profound knowledge of the métier, and also his wisdom, were guides…"[38] Among Guilmant's students were Dupré (who had started with Widor) and Nadia Boulanger, both musicians of unusually wide-ranging knowledge and interests.

Eugène Gigout (1911–1925)

Gigout (1844–1925) was a student of Saint-Saëns at the Niedermeyer School, and taught there until 1885, at which point he opened his own school devoted to liturgical organ playing.[39] He left there in 1911 to teach at the Conservatoire. Presumably he was interested in pedagogy, but we have very little record of his techniques. His most famous organ student, Duruflé, described him as "a fine man, but that is all," [40] and said that he learned more from his private lessons with Vierne and Tournemire.[41] He also taught Boëlmann, Fauré, André Messager, Roussel, and André Marchal; perhaps, like Benoist, he was more inspiring to composers than organists.

We do have a few hints about his playing from Jean Huré, who said that Gigout followed the Lemmens method generally, though he favored more foot crossing, with less use of the heel, and that his playing was "anti-romantic."[42] Archibald Henderson, an American student of Widor, visited Gigout's class and described the "carefully graded"

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ma fantaisie (!), enfin, 3) au moins deux pages d'une oeuvre de J.-S. Bach et deux pages de l'une ou l'autre des '24 pièces'."

[38] Vierne 58.

[39] This school (which was also Gigout's home) was the only place in Paris to hear actual organ recitals– they weren't given at the Conservatoire, they were forbidden at churches, and the only other private organ in the city was Widor's, which was only used for lessons. Ochse, 217–218.

[40] Dufourcq, 192

[41] Ebrecht, 15.

[42] Ochse, 218.

approach to plainchant improvisation, with first species in 2, 3, then 4 parts leading into florid counterpoint, canons, and fugue, as being "rigorous but stimulating."[43]

Marcel Dupré (1926–1954)

According to Odile Jutten, Dupré (1886–1971) "instituted an implacable methodology … [and] codified the fugue d'école, imposed an intensive use of the contrapuntal resources in all forms of improvisation, and led the students to an intellectual mastery without precedent."[44] Perhaps like Franck, Dupré seems to have concentrated the class on improvisation rather than repertoire (for a rather negative view of his repertoire teaching, see Michel Chapuis, below). There were two improvisation sessions per week: one was "scholastic" improvisation and fugue, the other was the free theme.

The "free" theme was actually to be improvised upon in a very straitjacketed form, [45] detailed in Dupré's improvisation text, with strict proportions according to the length of the given melody: an exposition, bridge, exposition in the relative, development, recapitulation of theme (with something new, such as a canon), a bridge theme (half as long as the first bridge), and a conclusion (using the head motive from the main tune, which should have been avoided in the development).[46]

One thing Dupré changed was that in the fugue the students had to maintain a countersubject with every entry of the subject – apparently, Dupré had introduced this technique when he competed as a student, and had impressed the jury. The fugue was always registered on the 8' fonds; the first 2/3 of the piece had to have entries in the

[43] Ochse, 218.
[44] Jutten, 88.
[45] Duchesneau/Chapuis, 59–60 (Odile Pierre has an even more formulaic sonata form as taught in Dupré's class, on p. 15). According to Chapuis, Dupré didn't care what harmonic language the student used.
[46] Pierre, 15.

relative and the sub-dominant, and the last 1/3 of the piece had to be a series of stretti.[47] There were rather strict rules for how long episodes were to be (never more than twice as long as the subject, usually). According to Chapuis, "the fugue was such a difficult thing that the other forms of improvisation seemed much more simple."[48]

The students never did service playing in Dupré's class; harmonization of the chant was only thing relating to church work (Guilmant had had to defend even this token of the liturgical use of the organ, because the government, which pays for the Conservatoire, became officially secular in 1905).[49] The students also learned no choral or congregational accompaniment (even though there were Protestants in class, for whom this would have been useful).[50]

Looking at the caliber of Dupré's students (such as Marie-Claire Alain, Pierre Cochereau, Jeanne Demessieux, Marie-Madeleine Duruflé, Jean Guillou, Gaston Litaize, Odile Pierre, Messiaen, and Langlais), there must have been something special about his teaching, limited in scope as it might seem. Litaize said that "Dupré was very attentive to the personality of each of his students, and wanted to push them in their own paths,"[51] a sentiment echoed by Messiaen: "Dupré helped me to become conscious of myself, through making me methodically work at improvisation."[52] Dupré himself wrote that "For twenty-eight years, from 1926 to 1954, this class was the center of my life. It was

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[47] Pierre, 8.
[48] Duchesneau/Chapuis, 61.
[49] Duchesneau/Chapuis, 61.
[50] Duchesneau/Chapuis, 63.
[51] Jacquet-Langlais, 51. "Dupré était très attentif à la personnalité de chacun des ses élèves, et désireux de les pousser dans leurs propres voies"
[52] Chassain-Dolliou, 73. "Dupré m'a aidé à prendre conscience de moi-mème, en me faisant travailler méthodiquement l'improvisation."

my passion and my joy, a joy enhanced by the brilliant careers of many of my former pupils."[53]

Rolande Falcinelli (1954–1987)

Dupré left the organ class to become the director of the Conservatoire, and his student Rolande Falcinelli (1920–2006) inherited it. She was the first woman to teach it, though women had been in the class for some years. She also made the most wide-ranging changes to the curriculum since Benoist started it.

Starting in 1961, the organ students were required to learn a "pièce de concours," just like other performance students.[54] These are specially commissioned pieces that are given six weeks before the recital. In 1971, the class was split into two: "execution" (performance) and improvisation. The former was the larger class: from 1975 to 1986, there were 28 students in execution, and 11 in improvisation (it's not clear if there was any overlap).[55] Those in execution were only required to produce a "short improvisation on a Gregorian anthem or on a choral" for their improvisation.[56] The improvisation class focused much more on concert improvisation of large forms, and the students were encouraged to be avant-garde.[57] The three forms they concentrated on were: 1) passacaglia or variation set; 2) prelude and fugue or symphonie movement; 3) free improvisation.[58] The tunes given at the concours were often atonal, with changing meters and huge ranges.[59]

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[53] Dupré, 96.
[54] Cramer program notes.
[55] Cramer.
[56] Jutten, 89.
[57] Jutten, 89.
[58] Jutten, 89. It isn't clear whether this was the same as Dupré's "free improvisation."
[59] Juteen, 89.

Michel Chapuis (1987–1995 or 1996)

There is not very much of a record of the class during Chapuis' (1930–) years there. He was a student of Dupré's, though he only spent one year in the class before winning a premier prix, and doesn't appear to have liked Dupré's teaching as far as repertoire was concerned.[60] He later became very interested in performance practice, and spent two years with the builder Müller, working on historical instruments. Chapuis has made innumerable recordings of the French Classical repertoire, and according to Odile Jutten added improvisation "de style classique dans les formes françaises des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles"[61] to the course, which puts him more in line with his contemporaries in Germany and the United States than with the tradition of the Conservatoire organ class.

After 1995

Since Chapuis, the class has been taught by different teachers, having control of either repertoire or improvisation: Loïc Mallié does improvisation, Olivier Latry and Michel Bouvard teach repertoire. It is very difficult to tell how the class is taught now, or the caliber of the students. One does get the impression that the class has perhaps been in decline since Dupré.

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[60] Duchesneau/Chapuis, 58: "[I learned] very little from Dupré, who required in Bach, for example, only the metronomic indication at the beginning of his works, and the fingering. If there was nothing wrong, no error, it was good. We didn't enter into the details of execution of a piece or into its spirit." ("très peu à Dupré qui exigeait que Bach, par exemple, seulement le mouvement métronomique indiqué au début de ses oeuvres, et les doigtés. S'il n'y avait pas de faille, das d'erreur, c'était très bien. On ne rentrait pas dans les détails de l'éxécution d'une pièce ou dans son esprit.")

[61] Jutten, 90.

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