



Two Modern Performances of César Franck's Violin Sonata: A Comparison Study of Daniel Rowland and Kirill Troussov

Zhibin Yang

Goldsmiths, University of London, 8 Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom

yunxuanuk@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper compares two unique interpretations of César Franck's Violin Sonata in A major by violinists Daniel Rowland and Kirill Troussov. The Franck Sonata requires expressive depth and technical challenges. Rowland's casual and communicative style contrasts with Troussov's formal and conservative approach to the music. Through the analysis of phrasing, bowing, and dynamics, this study explores how their distinct gestures and performance styles influence their reading of the piece, demonstrating the diversity in contemporary classical music interpretation.

Keywords: Music, Violin, Piano, Performances, chamber music

1 INTRODUCTION

As one of the most important pieces of violin composition, César Franck's Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano has been performed and recorded by all the great violinists, including legends such as Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh, since its premiere. All the great violin players have different renditions of the piece, together with communications with the piano performers. This piece is also known as the 'Franck Sonata' and has been an iconic piece in the violin repertoire since the early twentieth century. In recent years, the piece has become a milestone for young musicians that marks them as mature violinists. Due to the complexity of the harmony, its frequent change of expression and challenging bowing techniques, the Franck Sonata is frequently chosen as the chamber piece for international competitions.

Including his early success with Trio, Op.1, the Sonata in A Major is another highlight of Franck's legacy. The piece is dedicated to the violinist Eugene Ysaÿe and was premiered by him with the pianist Marie-Léontine Bordes-Pène at Ysaÿe's wedding in 1886. The piece consists of four movements. The first movement, *Allegro ben moderato*, introduces the sonata in an uncertain mystery phenome. It is followed by the energetic *Allegro* in the second movement. The third movement, *Recitativo-Fantasia: Ben moderato*, features the violin in a recitative style, requiring the performer to deeply understand the music and exercise imaginative freedom. The piece concludes with the

cantabile style of *Allegretto poco mosso*, which becomes one of the most memorable and iconic finales in the violin repertoire.

In the twenty-first century, Daniel Rowland and Kirill Troussov are two great musicians that have distinctive characteristics in performance styles. Regarding Franck's Sonata, Rowland's and Troussov's performances display the lyrical style of the sonata from the late Romantic period, both demonstrating strong and warm tone productions. However, by comparing their performances, this essay will state how their distinct gestures and movements are closely connected to their unique performance styles.

Troussov regularly appears at international music festivals and renowned concert halls all around the world. He studied with Yehudi Menuhin as a young musician and completed his studies later with teachers such as Zakhar Bron and Christoph Poppen. His repertoire spans well-known violin works from Baroque chamber music to Romantic orchestral pieces, including Beethoven's violin sonatas, Tchaikovsky's violin concerto and Brahms' violin concerto. Furthermore, Troussov's concerts have received great acclaim, with critics such as Harald Eggebrecht describing him as 'one of the most gifted violinists of his generation.' [1] A review from the daily newspaper *Kölnische Rundschau* praised his performance of the Franck sonata with his sister, describing it as 'A true master virtuoso. Kirill and Alexandra Troussov thrilled their audience during the concert yesterday. They have already played before they were even able to read or write. Kirill Troussov showed his talent as a true master virtuoso. The evening's highlight was the famous Sonata by César Franck.' [2]

Rowland gained recognition as a young musician and led the Brodsky Quartet for over a decade. His performance style was significantly influenced by Ivry Gitlis, whom he met in 1995. Dedicated to chamber music for many years as a member of Brodsky Quartet, Rowland founded the Stift International Music Festival in 2005. He has performed a great variety of music from renowned violin repertoires to Argentinian tango music. In recent years, Rowland has completed several projects, including Enescu's works for violin and contemporary compositions such as 'Pas de deux,' 'Distant Light,' 'The Messenger,' and the Romantic chamber works project 'A French Connection,' which includes the Franck sonata. His performance on this record has been described as 'a rapturously full-blooded account with wide vibrato and loving rubato, rich in portamento and voluptuous all round,' and his interpretation of the Franck sonata was considered 'A refreshingly individual, non-eccentric reading.' [3]

Troussov tours worldwide, performing and giving masterclasses in Europe, North America and Asia, engaging audiences and students globally. On the other hand, Rowland is dedicated to the annual Stift Festival and occasionally tours and teaches at conservatoires across Europe. Troussov's performance style is more conservative, whereas Rowland is more inclined to communicate with audiences during his performance. The difference between the characteristics of these two musicians is reflected in their interpretations of music and performance styles.

To demonstrate and understand these two violinists' performances, I chose Rowland's video 'Franck Sonata with Daniel Rowland & Martha Argerich'[4] and Troussov's video 'Kirill Troussov - Franck Sonata A major'[5] to compare their playing. It should be noted that the two chosen performances originate from distinct events, differing not only in venue but also in the level of formality. Troussov dressed in a

formal suit, while Rowland appeared more casual, wearing a black shirt and playing barefoot. These styles of dress indirectly reflect their different performing styles. These differences significantly influence the stylistic choices made by the performers. This paper will compare three major aspects of their performances: phrasing, bowing and dynamics. There are connections across these three sections, and in certain cases, examples will be chosen and analysed based on their contribution to the performance.

2 PHRASING

Phrasing styles include different elements. In this piece, the differences among these two performers are primarily tempo, the use of rubato and styles of vibrato. Troussov has a wider smooth vibrato; every note is elegant and controlled, reminding audiences of a 'Grande' style of playing, with a more formal presentation and elegance, typical of performers like David Oistrakh. On the other hand, Rowland has much more dramatic changes within this piece, especially in the third movement, which sometimes provides a sharp and fresh tone depending on his interpretation of the phrase. Rowland prefers a faster vibrato, frequently changing bow speed, which is reminiscent of his mentor Ivry Gitlis and virtuosic performers like Jascha Heifetz. Rowland's performance is less formal and displays more freedom than Troussov's performance.



Fig. 1. The opening in the first movement, measures 5-6.

In Figure 1, the declamatory first movement of the Franck Sonata, Rowland provides more mystery colours by breathing subtly between notes and phrases, demonstrating a clear question-answer style of phrasing. The vibrato is limited only on certain selected notes, such as the second note F sharp in measure 5 and the last note D sharp in measure 6. However, Troussov has a more fluent transition between short phrases to move as a long phrase rather than notes and continues to use vibrato among most notes.



Fig. 2. The second movement, measures 85-89.

Rowland and Troussov demonstrate different interpretations of tempo in measure 85-89. Rowland chose a slower *quasi lento* and greater *rall.* for a greater contrast with *animando*. In contrast, Troussov showed faster and more fluent movement, which results in a less dramatic contrast in tempo (see Figure 2).

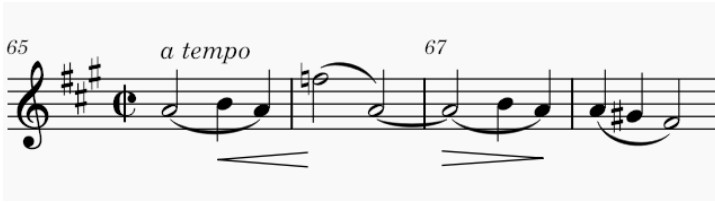


Fig. 3. The third movement, measures 65 to 68.

In Figure 3, Rowland's performance emphasises a fast and gradual vibrato on note F natural in measure 66, mimicking a soprano singing. On the other hand, Trousov chose a standard violin interpretation of building a *crescendo* from note F natural to note A on the half note in measure 66.



Fig. 4. The fourth movement *ad lib*, from measure 143.

The *ad lib* section from Figure 4 is one of the most iconic sections of the piece. Rowland interprets the *fortissimo* using the full bow and playing with more freedom in *ad lib* together with piano. The vibrato is fast and more dramatic. Conversely, Trousov demonstrates a relatively safe and straight tempo, with full bow, which results in a grand sound projection.



Fig. 5. The fourth movement ending, from measure 222.

Figure 5 shows the *Poco animato*, both performers played with great energy, communicating with the pianist to deliver a grand finale. Rowland played this last section with a touch of *agitato*. As a great Romantic sonata, many great musicians have recorded the piece. Jascha Heifetz, one of the most memorable violinists of the last century, recorded the Franck sonata with Arthur Rubinstein. Compared to the two contemporary performers, Heifetz chose a steadier tempo and produced a smoother sound in the last movement. His *poco animato* is less dramatic compared to the two contemporary performers. Heifetz even took the liberty to alter the cadence of this final movement with his own interpretation, adding arpeggios between the top A on the E string and the bottom A on the G string. [6]

To summarise, both Rowland and Trousov delivered an impressive presentation of Romantic violin performance through their distinct phrasings. While there are many

details that differ between them, these variations result in unique interpretations and tastes, with neither being superior or inferior.

3 BOWING

For violinists, the right hand is the essence of violin playing. While the left hand primarily influences pitch and vibrato, the bow hand determines the character and tone production of the performance. Different techniques are applied to produce the ideal sound, reflecting each musician's interpretation.



Fig. 6. The first movement ending.

In Figure 6, the two violinists have their own understanding of bowing. Rowland starts with a slower bow speed and saves the bow on the note C sharp for the flowing B. This results in a dynamic change from *forte* to *piano*. This is used in conjunction with the use of a harmonic on the last note A, bringing a more mysterious character to the performance. Whereas Troussov uses a great amount of bow for the C sharp, bringing the dynamics from *forte* then *diminuendo* into *mp*. Furthermore, he did not use a harmonic on the note A.



Fig. 7. The second movement *forte con passione*, from measure 102.

In Figure 7, Troussov's bowing is controlled; the bow mostly stays on the string, helping to project more resonance when the note ends. Alternatively, Rowland uses a greater bow speed and length; vertically there is more bouncing on the bow, resulting in a freer expression.



Fig. 8. The second *quasi presto*, measures 206-209 in the second movement.

In Figure 8, two performers play in a similar style, with slight difference in intensity. Rowland performed on the string in a tremolo-like style, the bow flying energetically

and he was not afraid of occasionally sharp screeching sounds. Yet, Trousov starts with light *sautillé* and then builds into tremolo. The bow is always in control, which results in occasionally strained projection together with the grand piano.



Fig. 9. Last three measures from the third movement.

Rowland utilised a bow vibrato technique on the note E flat in measure 115, which is rarely seen in contemporary violinists - only a few violinists such as Leonidas Kavakos and Pekka Kuusisto commonly use the bow vibrato. Indeed, this technique was Mr. Gitlis's iconic bowing technique.

In the final movement of this sonata, both performers adopt a *cantabile* style, bringing out the singing quality of the melody from Figure 9. Trousov exhibits more body movement than before and both musicians fully use the bow, employing significant bowing speed to enhance the *cantabile* style.

In conclusion, Rowland generally has a greater bowing speed and applies more pressure whenever necessary, this has led to a more liberated spirit in his performance style. Trousov's bowing, on the other hand, has a more refined presentation but is less vigorous.

4 DYNAMICS

Being a part of the late Romantic period repertoire, Franck's Sonata includes detailed expressions and dynamics written by the composer that provide performers with precise instructions to follow. However, this results in fewer artistic choices for individual interpretation.



Fig. 10. The first movement, measures 28-31.

In Figure 10, Rowland plays measures 28-31 in the first movement with much more dynamic contrast, presenting a clear *crescendo* into *fortissimo* from earlier *pianissimo* in measure 25. He uses more body movements, increases the vibrato speed and width along with the *crescendo* and applies greater bow speed on the final G sharp. In contrast, Trousov interprets this section with less dynamic variation. His gestures remain relatively stable even in *fortissimo*, resulting in an elegant ending with less bow speed on the final G sharp.



Fig. 11. The second movement, measure 33

Figure 11 shows Troussov demonstrates a clear *crescendo*, starting with a shorter bow and gradually increasing the bow speed and the amount of bow used on each note. His dynamics and emotions are more controlled. In contrast, Rowland shows less *crescendo*, instead beginning with a *forte* with a higher bow speed. He presents a clear emotional change in the music with more freedom and energy.

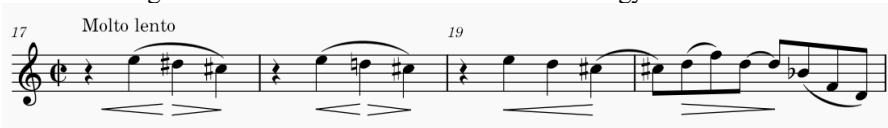


Fig. 12. The third movement Molto lento from measure 17.

In Figure 12, Rowland plays measure 17 and measure 18 in a similar dynamic change from *mf* to *forte* then *diminuendo* down to *mp* in measure 21. Troussov on the other hand, presents differently, the dynamics from measure 17 are *crescendo* from *mp* to *mf*; measure 18 raises from *mp* into *forte* then back to *mf* into measure 19. Troussov shows a greater contrast and distinct interpretation of varying dynamic changes. Both performers have a similar interpretation in measures 20 and 21.

In conclusion, there are minimal differences in dynamics between the performances by Rowland and Troussov. Overall, both performed faithfully to the score. Any variations in dynamics could be attributed to the venue's acoustics, the instruments used and the recording quality, all of which should be taken into consideration.

5 CONCLUSION

Through detailed analysis and comparisons between the performances by Rowland and Troussov, my research argues that different learning experiences and personalities will influence the understanding of the same piece. After comparing the different interpretations, there are multiple approaches to the same music. Furthermore, the collected sources in this essay will be helpful to future violinists. Besides my previous analyses, I also argue that different performance venues will influence the performing style.

Rowland and Troussov have presented outstanding performances of Franck's Sonata, each with their own interpretations. While there are additional aspects that need to be considered when analysing musical performance, my paper only focuses on three major aspects due to the word limit. The performances do, however, demonstrate the musicians' techniques, imagination and understanding of the music, the collaboration

between the violin and the piano, as well as the communication between the audiences and the musicians.

REFERENCE

1. Troussov, K. "Press Reviews" Kirill Troussov|Violinist|Official Website, Accessed 15 May 2024. <https://troussov.com/en/press.php>.
2. Ibid.
3. Gardner, C. 'A French connection' review of *A French Connection*, Gramophone, May, 2021, Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/a-french-connection>
4. Rowland, D. and Argerich, M. 'Franck Sonata with Daniel Rowland & Martha Argerich' YouTube video, 28:41. Posted by 'Daniel Rowland Violinist' Nov 2, 2020. Accessed 7 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYvNQ792gYs&list=PLNFdggfGW8D3pZcZ3RZmdIi2NxFcLto9gN&index=3>
5. Troussov, K. and Troussova, A. 'Kirill Troussov - Franck Sonata A major' YouTube video, 27:30. Posted by 'Kirill Troussov' 5 March 2019. Accessed 7 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX3a4JKHPxA&list=PLNFdggfGW8D3pZcZ3RZmdIi2NxFcLto9gN&index=2>.
6. Heifetz, J. and Rubinstein, A. 'Franck: Violin Sonata in A (1886)4 movs-Jascha Heifetz&Arthur Rubinstein' YouTube video, 25:52. Posted by 'Donald HerbertHolmes' May 12, 2018. Accessed 10 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpTlkN07zCo>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

