

Robijn Tilanus

# Rubato



*Rubato* is the Italian term for ‘robbed’ or ‘stolen’.  
Why is this album called *Rubato*?



## Rubato in music

*Rubato* is a musical term. It is used when one note ‘steals’ from another note. This happens when you play the first note just a little longer than the score prescribes, and the next note just a little bit shorter.

For example, imagine a piece of squared paper. Take a pencil and divide each square into quarters by putting a ‘plus’ sign in them. Then divide these new smaller squares into four even smaller squares, and so on. No matter how many times you repeat this, you will never produce a flowing, wavy line. Squares will remain squares. With *rubato*, it is as if you draw a flowing line on squared paper.

The same is true for musical notation. It is clearly not designed to indicate *rubato*. You can shorten notes, twice, three, four or more times. This is like dividing squares into smaller squares. No matter how small the squares, they will always remain squares. Playing *rubato* is like drawing a flowing line on squared paper: in music, one note has to ‘steal’ a little from another note.

When in music you improvise, you do not have to bother about musical notation. That is why improvisations are particularly appropriate for playing *rubato*. I love playing *rubato*. Most of all I like to play strictly in time with my left hand, square by square so to speak (the accompaniment). Simultaneously with my right hand I play a melody freely, *rubato*. Playing like this, the expressiveness of the melody can be enhanced enormously. You can experience an incredible sense of freedom throughout your whole body. In this album, I often play in this way.

In Western classical music, this form of playing *rubato* used to be quite common. One of Frédéric Chopin's students wrote: 'I learned the true secret of *rubato*, where the accompaniment maintains a fixed tempo whereas the melody plays around by accelerating or decelerating, eventually returning to the basic pulse.' Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, a son of Johann Sebastian Bach, was asked why his way of playing always sounded so expressive. He replied: 'That is because my left hand always plays strictly in time, while my right hand plays *rubato*.'

Nowadays this form of playing *rubato* has almost died out in Western classical music. It is difficult to find a modern classical pianist playing Chopin with the *rubato* that his contemporary students spoke of.

However in African music, this way of playing *rubato* is still very common. It is usually divided between different instruments: most instrumentalists stick to the pulse (they play 'by the squared paper') while the soloist plays *rubato*.

We can also hear this way of playing *rubato* in jazz, pop and South American music: these are musical genres with African roots.

I love to teach this form of *rubato*. And I love sharing it through my performances. I hope you the listener will enjoy it as much as I do!

## Rubato in these strange times

This album was made between April and October 2020: bizarre times for everyone. All over the world we are *rubato* of billions of hugs because of restrictions and lockdowns, whereas embracing people can be so healing and comforting. Worldwide, all of us are *rubato* of so much more...

## Rubato on caring wings

During the making of this album, I was involved in a deeply disturbing incident. A young cello player Simon (not his real name) came into my life as a student. He was extremely talented and promising, highly sensitive, gentle of character. In a short time, we also became friends.

Life was hard on him. He had psychiatric treatment and was prescribed psychopharmaceutical drugs. The prescribed dosage did not take into account his highly sensitive nature.

One of the side-effects of the drugs was that he could no longer play the cello. Playing the cello was not only his profession, it also was his way of release, his way of dealing with his emotions. Without this form of release, his emotions were bottled up. He himself, his mother, his girlfriend, his best friend, his brother and me: none of us could convince his psychiatrists that this side-effect was disastrous for him.

Another side-effect of the drugs was restlessness and aggression. Every day, after he got his daily dosage, he felt growing anger. This varied from day to day. Mostly he managed to control himself till the feeling of anger had gone away, usually after a couple of hours. But every now and then, he could not control himself and went crazy with anger. During such an outburst, he went completely out of his mind. At first, he directed his anger at objects. Later also at people.

Then one day, completely unexpected, his rage was directed at me. He did not recognise me, he did not know what he was doing. Suddenly, quick as lightning, he pulled out a big strand of hair from my head. Then he grabbed me by the throat with his strong hands. I made a shrieking sound I know only from crime movies. I thought: this is the end. I looked death in the eye. Simon, the gentle! *Rubato* of himself.

Afterwards, I went home to my piano and started to improvise. The first sounds that came from my hands were dark and searching, full of bewilderment and incomprehension. Then came silence. Then a wave of sounds full of pain, sadness, anger, frustration. Then silence again. This continued.

And then, slowly but surely, a melody arose, out of nowhere, a soothing melody. The melody repeated itself, and kept on repeating. Each time with small variations. It was as if a feeling of comfort went through my body and poured out of my hands to become music. I kept on playing and playing, because I felt how it consoled and helped me. It was as if the music lifted me up and carried me – *on caring wings*.

And so a feeling of thankfulness came over me. Immense gratitude, because I was still alive. I was still here! It felt like a wake-up call: Robijn, you are still allowed to live, you can still play the piano. Make something of it!

This piano playing was essential for me to heal my soul.

Some time later I listened to the recording of my improvisation. I cut out the dark beginning and made two additional cuts to shorten the original recording, which was over half an hour. Apart from that, I left the original unchanged. It is the last track of this album.

I dedicate this album to Simon and everybody who, in one way or another, is feeling *rubato*. I hope the music will lift you up and carry you –

*on caring wings.*