

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Inégalité and Rameau's Concerts: a case of "Ille dixit"?

by Claudio Di Vérolì

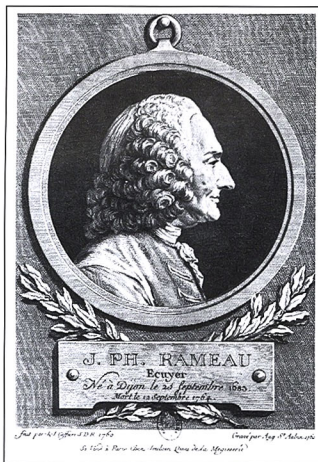
On how a baroque masterwork has been more often than not poorly performed.

French Baroque *inégalité*

Throughout the Baroque period, and well before and after it, French musical performance was strongly based on *inégalité*, a manner influencing both phrasing and articulation. It is well clear today that *inégalité* was strongly influenced by French language with its accent on the last spoken syllable of each word. Modern revival of *inégalité* begins at the end of the sixties, mainly through the influence of Kenneth Gilbert working in Paris, France. In Britain the Scottish harpsichordist Geraint Jones was a pioneer, recording some French pieces with *inégalité* c.1966 in a beautiful LP issued by EMI, HMV code HQS 1100 (unfortunately never re-issued).

Baroque Frenchmen called *pointer* to play pairs of quavers as if the first one had a point and the second one were a semiquaver. They also sometimes said *pointé* meaning *inégal*, but several documents attest that the *inégalité* is far more subtle than the *pointé*: Rousseau¹ notes that in French music "the quavers are always slightly *pointées*".

Modern research has established that standard *inégalité* can be best obtained by assuming the crotchet as made up of five equal parts, the first quaver taking three-fifths of its length and the second quaver two-fifths. Mathematically this is a middle-of-the-road way between *égalité* and triplets, and accordingly it yields notes clearly perceived as unequal, yet much less unequal than triplets². Sometimes a "hard" *inégalité* was used, playing triplets (the first two quavers being tied as one note). Lully's Overtures



Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764).
Engraving dated 1762 after a bust by Caffieri.
The reference to Rameau's death is a later addition.

were to be played even more unequal, i.e. *pointées*, but these extreme *inégalités* disappeared in the 18th century. All this was not to be too mathematical, but not quite as free as a *rubato* either.

Baroque sources very seldom gave details about *inégalité*, like **when** and **how** it should be applied. By far the most detailed source is Hotteterre³, very detailed about the metres to which *inégalité* applies, to which notes it applies, and the few cases in which it should not be used.

He was also very explicit about articulation and the *tu-ru* doctrine (see below).

There were clear rules on how to produce *inégalité* on different types of instruments :

- In **bowed** instruments *inégalité* was associated with the ancient French short dance bow. It was thus played following the "bow up and bow down" doctrine: one begins bow-up on a weak beat, to be played short, followed by the bow-down on the strong beat, to be played long, and so forth.
- In **woodwinds** *inégalité* was associated with tongue and throat articulation. It was played following the "tu-ru" doctrine: one begins by pronouncing "tu" to attack the weak beat, played short, followed by the softer "ru" to attack the strong beat, played long, and so forth.
- In **keyboards**, scales *inégaes* were mostly played with two fingers only. Finger-crossing mostly⁴ occurred during the longer transition from the strong-and-long beat to the weak-and-short beat.

The above manners inevitably preclude legato. The separation among notes is a subtle non-legato from weak to strong beat ("ru" / bow down / next finger) alternating with a noticeable gap from strong to weak beat ("tu" / bow up / crossing fingers). For this reason it became customary to write slurs over passages of three or more notes to prescribe that *inégalité* was to be suppressed.

Some ambiguity arises with **slurred pairs** of notes: for most authors - including Rameau - they suppress *inégalité*, but Rameau wrote a few passages slurred in pairs which however context clearly shows to be *inégaux*⁵. Note also that Baroque French keyboard players, rather than our modern legato, used either :

- the "standard" articulation, played on the keyboard by raising a finger at the same time that the following finger is lowered, thus producing a **subtle non-legato**
- the "slurred" articulation, played by keeping a finger down, lowering the following finger and, upon the beginning of the note, raising the previous finger: this clearly was an **over-legato**

In modern times, the first major recording to

use *inégalité* throughout was F. Couperin's *Premier Ordre* by Kenneth Gilbert⁶ (Paris, 1970), still today a wonderful master class on how *inégalité* was and should be played. Scott Ross, then a pupil of Gilbert's, was already playing with beautiful *inégaux*. Perhaps the first orchestral recording with plenty of *inégaux* is Destouches's *Les Eléments*, conducted in 1978 by Christopher Howgood⁷. From then on, slowly at first, *inégalité* progressed until specialists like William Christie presently use it in

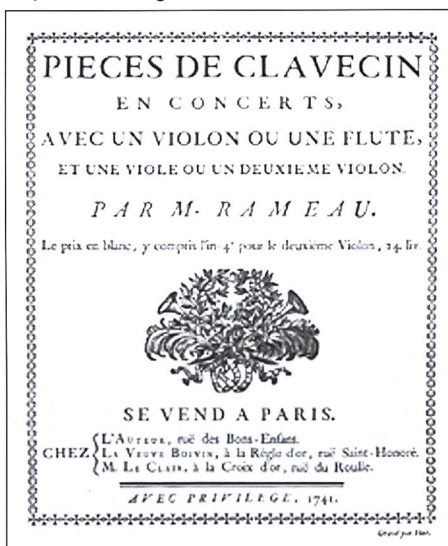
all the French music they play and conduct, except when they find good evidence not to use it. I was lucky enough to be able to briefly talk to William Christie about this point after one of his performances at the Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires in 1994. I believe Christie's approach shows common sense and sound stylish performance but, curiously enough, some recording reviews criticise him for playing "too many *inégaux*"!

Inégalité, Rameau and the Concerts

Rameau's *Concerts*⁸, first published in 1741, may be regarded as the masterwork of French Baroque chamber music. Written as trios for "harpsichord with a violin or a flute, and a viol or a second violin", they are often played today with either violin or flute, or both in unison, or using the violin in some movements and the flute in others. Most recordings rightly use the prescribed seven-stringed French gamba viol and not a second violin, which is really a poor second-best substitute.

One of the important musical theorists of antiquity, mainly in the field of harmony, Rameau (1683-1764) was also a practical musician and composer who spent his whole life in a musical world based on *inégalité*,

and there is no reason to believe that he thought otherwise. His works for solo harpsichord are played with *inégalité* in most recordings of our times. One would accordingly expect Rameau's *Concerts* to be also played with standard *inégalité*. It is therefore surprising to find that, among the most widely diffused recordings of the *Concerts*, more often than not the performance does not follow *inégalité* according to the established rules.



Frontispiece of the 1st edition of Rameau's *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts*. Paris 1741.

Typesetting over engraved border and ornament.

I must apologise for not being able to pinpoint the source of a modern belief (let me call it the “tenet”) according to which Rameau radically changed the rules of *inégalité*⁹. I am sure to have read here and there some brief comments including the misconceptions that I will explain below with some detail. My conclusion is that the tenet may just be something to which uninformed musicians easily arrive. “There is nothing more dangerous than a **little** knowledge”. Let us be more specific.

The tenet is based on three points:

- Rameau’s above-mentioned custom of sometimes slurring pairs of *inégalés*.
- The *Musette en Rondeau* from Rameau’s second collection¹⁰ of 1724, and also a few other pieces, which later he transcribed for orchestra. The *Musette* was used in his opéra-ballet *Les Fêtes d’Hébé* of 1739: a typical *inégal* piece for harpsichord, it was transcribed with a few important changes plus added slurs from strong to weak beats, plus *pointé* notation.
- The *Concerts*, published two years later in 1741: here also some slurs over pointed pairs appear, though only in three of the fifteen pieces that make up the *Concerts*.

From the above slender evidence **the tenet** arises as the following set of statements:

- A. Rameau in his later years decided to establish his own radically new rules for *inégalité*.
- B. His new way of writing the dances for orchestra shows also, retrospectively, how he intended both the original harpsichord pieces and the *Concerts* to be played.
- C. “First new rule” *inégaless* were always written and played as slurred pairs, strong-to-weak. This **reverses** the established *inégalité* convention of a non-legato joining the notes weak-to-strong.
- D. “Second new rule” only pairs marked with a slur were played *inégaless*, whether written pointed or not, all the remaining notes being played *égales*. This **reverses** the pervasiveness of *inégalité*, which ceases to be a rule and becomes an exception.

With our present knowledge, all the above points are easy to refute as they contradict evidence:

A. There is ample evidence that the ancient and established rules of *inégalité* were in use for decades before Rameau’s times, throughout his own long life and well afterwards also. Surely if a very influential musician and theorist like him had changed the rules, a) he would have written about it and b) he would have had followers. We find instead no extant French late 18th century document showing anything like such a radical change. Indeed, extant barrel organs show that well into the 19th century Frenchmen were still using classical *inégalité*¹¹.

B. During his life Rameau had his suites of 1724 reissued only twice: in 1731 and in 1736, with no modifications whatsoever. When later in 1739 - well 15 years after the first edition - he transcribed a few pieces for orchestra, he wrote down the dots and slurs for musicians that otherwise would have played everything with a subtle *inégalité* and non-legato. A player of his time comparing the original harpsichord pieces with the orchestral versions would simply conclude that Rameau now preferred a special articulation to be used in some passages of the orchestral version, not as a new rule for *inégalité* but **instead** of *inégalité*¹².

C. With a few exceptions, mostly quite clear by context and already mentioned above⁵, slurred pairs in Rameau, unless specifically written *pointés*, are to be played equal. There is no reason or evidence either in documents or in the music itself to believe otherwise.

D. There is no evidence that Rameau ever intended passages left unslurred to be played *égales*. This would turn *inégalité* into an infrequent occurrence, while on the contrary we have plenty of evidence - from Baroque treatises to barrel organs - on the pervasiveness of *inégalité*.

Summarising the above, there is no contemporary evidence stating that Rameau, or for that matter anybody else, ever tried to radically redefine *inégalité*. In his transcriptions for orchestra Rameau was

simply prescribing a special effect for **some** passages of **some** of his works that, in their original version for solo harpsichord, contemporary players obviously performed with customary *inégalité*.

As for the *Concerts*, I have performed and studied them thoroughly for the last two decades, and I find that both familiarity with *inégalité* and a detailed study of the score allows informed musicians to perform the *Concerts* with plenty of stylish, consistent and beautiful *inégaux*¹³.

The culprit: recordings? Ille dixit?

Why then have so many modern musicians followed the above-described tenet and, even more strangely, why did they do it - and often still do - mostly when playing Rameau's *Concerts*?

Though long recognised as an impressive masterwork, until the present decade the *Concerts* were seldom performed in public and were not frequently recorded either. For the performer their personal and unique style has never been easy to get to terms with. Furthermore, they are technically very demanding for both the violist and the harpsichordist. It is then quite natural for modern musicians to try and hear a recording before attempting to play the *Concerts*. Therefore, before stating my main point, let me summarily review a few basic hits in the history of recordings of the work:

- The first widely-known recording of the *Concerts* (perhaps the first commercial recording ever) was made in the fifties by Rampal(modern flute), Veyron-Lacroix(using a Pleyel instrument purported to be a harpsichord) and a cello. A performance in the so-called "modern" style, graceful score-reading mostly devoid of either romantic expression or baroque mannerisms.
- Members of the Bernicia Ensemble record the work in England in 1966. They were David

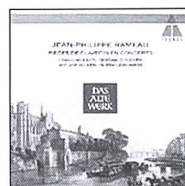
Nicholson(modern flute), Daphne Godson(modern violin), David Wiggins(modern cello instead of a viol) and Audrey Innes (again a "modern harpsichord", with lots of leather-quilled and weak-sounding stops). Very few baroque features in the playing, strong vibrato throughout, all *égales*.

[Actually they do play "strongly *inégaux*" in *La Laborde* to synchronize with the triplets, but this feature did not belong to *inégalité*, being common baroque practice by no means restricted to or typical of French music].

- With ancient instruments the first recording, widely known, was made in the late sixties by Gustav Leonhardt(harpsichord), Frans Bruggen(flute), Sigiswald Kuijken(violin) and Wieland Kuijken(gamba viol). Originally released as LP and in recent years re-issued as CD: Teldec AW 77618. This was a recording by very fine musicians and, as far as I could find, the first commercial recording to follow the above-described tenet, though not very strictly. It was *égales* throughout except for a few passages, mostly in *La Timide's 2e Rondeau*¹⁴

- Very few recordings followed. It is a real pity that no recording of the *Concerts* was ever issued with either Kenneth Gilbert or Scott Ross at the harpsichord, both at the front line of *inégalité* in the seventies.

- In 1978 John Gibbons(harpsichord), Daniel Stepner(violin) and Laura Jeppesen(gamba viol), recorded the *Concerts* in Boston with very fine antique instruments. Theirs is first-rate playing, but here also *inégalité* is virtually absent. The only *inégaux* are found in *La Timide's 2e Rondeau*, and there only in the *Rondeau* and the *2e Reprise* (based on Leonhardt?).
- Alan Cuckston(harpsichord), Elisabeth Parry(flute), Kenneth Mitchell(violin) and Alison Crum(gamba viol), recorded the work in England in 1990 for a CD issued by Naxos, code 8550464. The only *inégaux* are found in *La Laborde* and in *La*



Timide-2e Rondeau, and there in the *Rondeau* section only (following Leonhardt even more strictly ...)

- ... but in 1989 the Trio Sonnerie: Mitzi Meyerson (harpsichord), Monica Huggett (violin) and Sarah Cunningham (gamba viol) had already produced a more stylish version, also recorded in England. They still played *La Timide* "the Leonhardt way", but further *inégaies* appeared in *La la Poplinière*, *La Rameau* and *La Marais* (plus of course the triplets in *La Laborde*): we are beginning to leave "the tenet" aside.

- Finally in 1992 Christophe Rousset (harpsichord), Ryo Terakado (violin) and Kaori Uemura (gamba viol) record the work in France for the CD coded HMX 2901418, issued by Harmonia Mundi. Christophe Rousset plays on the famous Hemsch harpsichord of the Paris Conservatoire¹⁵. They set the record straight: at long last, here we have an excellent and stylish performance with a savvy use of standard *inégalité*. The fact that Kenneth Gilbert was among Rousset's distinguished teachers may be more than a mere coincidence.

- At least two other recordings with early instruments and first-rate musicians have been issued in recent years, one by Robert Kohnen (harpsichord) and the Kuijken brothers, the other by Ketil Haugsand (harpsichord), Catherine Mackintosh (violin) and Laurence Dreyfus (gamba viol). I have not been able to hear these recordings, but the ones mentioned above will suffice to show my point.

Which is quite straightforward now, I am afraid. Whoever has attempted to perform the work will agree that the interpretation of *inégaies* in the *Concerts* poses some serious challenges. Why then did most performers before Rousset follow the tenet? Perhaps because the first recording to address those challenges in a systematic way - though not in the way we now believe adequate - was Leonhardt's? Maybe gramophone recordings, useful as they are, can lead to the perpetuation of the first (and far from ideal) solution to a problem, specially if a very influential musician is involved. *Ille dixit!*¹⁶

How to do it

We have now dealt succinctly on *inégalité*, and extensively on how Rameau's *Concerts* were always, are sometimes, and should not be played. What about some details on how they should be played? The issue is relevant because, again, the *Concerts* are by no means standard French fare to which the complex rules for *inégalité* could be easily applied. My prescriptions:

1er Concert

La Coulicam - quavers *inégaies* except when slurred

La Livri - *égales* except the *2e Reprise*, in which the quavers are *inégaies*

Le Vézinet - quavers *inégaies*

2e Concert

La Laborde - quavers strongly *inégaies*, in spite of the slurs, coinciding with the triplets

La Boucon - (*égales*)¹⁷

L'Agaçante - *égales*

1er Menuet - quavers strongly *inégaies*, coinciding with the triplets

2e Menuet - quavers *inégaies*

3e Concert

La la Poplinière - semiquavers *inégaies*

La Timide, 1er Rondeau - *égales* except the *2e Reprise*, in which the quavers are *inégaies*

La Timide, 2e Rondeau - quavers *inégaies*

Tambourins - *égales*

4e Concert

La Pantomime - *égales*

L'Indiscrete - *égales*

La Rameau - semiquavers *inégaies*, except in the passages with repeated notes and mixed with demisemiquavers

5e Concert

La Forqueray - quavers strongly *inégaies*, coinciding with the triplets

La Cupis - *égales* (but with discrete rubato, i.e. *très tendrement*)

La Marais - quavers *inégaies*

The above list coincides with the masterly Rousset-Terakado-Uemura performance in most - but not all - the pieces: I really believe that a few pieces they play *égales*¹⁸ should be *inégaies* instead.

Finally, the list above reveals a surprising statistic: unlike most of his contemporaries, by the time Rameau wrote his *Concerts* he clearly preferred *inégalité* for fast movements rather than for slow ones¹⁹.

Footnotes :

1. Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique*, Paris 1767. Entry "Pointer", p. 387: "In Italian music all the quavers are always *égales*, unless they are written *pointées*. But in French music the quavers are not played exactly equal unless the metre is in four beats; in all the others, the quavers are always slightly *pointées* unless specifically stated otherwise with the words *Croches égales*" (my translation from French). This assertion is only approximate, far from the rigorous detail given by Hotteterre³.
2. It is a pity that many modern performers do not follow this rule. Beginners tend to play it too "jerky", while some professionals instead are rightly criticised for a barely-noticeable effect. French Baroque *inégalité*, however subtle, was always meant to be clearly perceived by the listener.
3. Hotteterre le Romain, *L'Art de Preluder*, Paris 1719. Modern reprint: Zurfluh, Paris. pp. 66-70. In modern times Hotteterre's instructions became widely known mainly thanks to their inclusion by David Lasocki in his introduction to his translation of another treatise by Hotteterre: *Principles of the Flute, Recorder and Oboe*, printed by Barrie & Rockliff, London 1968. It is in the *Principles* where Hotteterre deals extensively with the *tu-ru* articulation for woodwinds.
4. F.Couperin, *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin*, Paris 1716. Modern reprint with English and German translation edited by Anna Linde, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden 1933. Most (though by no means all) of his finger crossings (e.g. the right-hand 3rd finger passing over either the 2nd or the 4th finger) happen from a strong to a weak beat, exactly where *inégalité* gives the performer more time to produce the crossing, uncomfortable for beginners.
5. This is found e.g. in a few passages of the *Concerts* where pairs of slurred quavers are played against triplets, context clearly showing that the second of each quaver should strike together with the third note of the triplet, as customary in Baroque France and also elsewhere.
6. F.Couperin: *Pieces de Clavecin, Premier Ordre*. LP recorded by Kenneth Gilbert, Harpsichord. Harmonia Mundi, Paris 1971. In later LPs Gilbert completed the recording of Couperin's harpsichord pieces. In the 1990s the records were re-issued as CDs, the *Premier Livre* being now a 2-CD set, HMA 190 351. After so many years, this still counts among the very best *inégaux* performances ever.
7. *Les Eléments*. Two ballet suites respectively by Jean-Féry Rebel (1737) and André Cardinal Destouches (1721). LP recorded in London in 1978 by Christopher Hogwood conducting The Academy of Ancient Music. Re-issued in the 1990s as a CD, L'Oiseau-Lyre 421 656. Of particular interest is the performance of the Menuets in track no.12.
8. Rameau. *Pieces de Clavecin en Concerts*. Paris 1741. Modern facsimile reprint by Minkoff, Geneva 1982.
9. The **tenet** obviously originates somewhere in the sixties, but whether it was ever formally stated in written form, I doubt it. No reference to it is found in either the

major modern treatises on Rameau and French Baroque music or the prefaces to modern editions of Rameau's *Pieces de Clavecin* and *Concerts*.

10. Rameau. *Pieces de Clavessin avec une Methode pour la Mechanique des Doigts*. Paris, 1724. Modern reprint edited by Kenneth Gilbert, Heugel, Paris 1979.

11. David Fuller. *Mechanical Musical Instruments as a Source for the Study of Notes Inégales*. Divisions, Musical Box Society, Cleveland, Ohio 1979. This is a booklet with an excellent paper by Prof. Fuller plus a small LP with recorded examples from ancient *sérinettes* (bird-organs: ancient music boxes playing by means of small organ pipes).

12. This is obviously also the conclusion reached by a pioneer and respected authority on French Baroque performance like Kenneth Gilbert. In his 1978 edition of the *Pieces de Clavecin* (see above) he includes two small facsimiles of Rameau's orchestral transcriptions. He refers briefly to the latter in the preface, but no mention is made of Rameau's added slurs and *pointés*, which obviously Gilbert considers immaterial for the performance of the original harpsichord pieces.

13. "Down here and far away in space and time", we played *inégaux* throughout the outer movements of the *5e Concert* on early instruments at the Museo de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires, back in 1981.

14. Though far from a prolific writer, Gustav Leonhardt, through his many performances, recordings and fascinating oral and written remarks, has been a most important source of inspiring ideas for both players and musicologists. But in the sixties neither he nor Bruggen or the Kuijken were specialists in French Baroque music. Modern reprints of Hotteterre being just fresh from the press, I assume they still were - as most musicians at the time - scarcely knowledgeable about the intricacies of French *inégalité*.

15. As I was told in 1975 in Paris by Hubert Bédard and Pierre Dumoulin, the Hemsch 1761 harpsichord had just been discovered by the latter, who immediately purchased it on behalf of the Paris Conservatoire. Found in incredibly good condition, upon first examination it became clear that it was an unique case of an unfinished instrument surviving: it had never been strung and no mechanism had ever been installed. In the following year the instrument was restored, strung and endowed with a wooden mechanism by the late Hubert Bédard, then curator of the Conservatoire collection. Ideally suited for Rameau's music and used in many recordings since, today the instrument is in the *Musée de la Musique*, Cité de la Musique, Paris.

16. About 15 years ago a noted German harpsichordist and organist visited Argentina twice, giving recitals and public master lectures on the interpretation of Bach's keyboard works. In one of those lectures, asked why he did not use any *inégalité* in his performances of Bach works in French style, he candidly said - to everybody's surprise - that he did not because Gustav Leonhardt did not either!

17. Slurred and dotted throughout. There is no opportunity to apply the doctrine of *inégalité*. A few notes written as quavers are actually to be played as

semiquavers, not as *inégaies* but as mandatory overdotting: context shows that Rameau wrote them as quavers merely to avoid writing a double dot (unheard of by most Baroque musicians) in the preceding crotchet.

18 Performance by Rousset-Terakado-Uemura, when different from our prescriptions:

. *La Coulicam*: slurred pairs sometimes played in reverse inequality. (A beautiful effect known indeed in Baroque France, but accepting it for Rameau yields contradictory effects in many of his other works.)

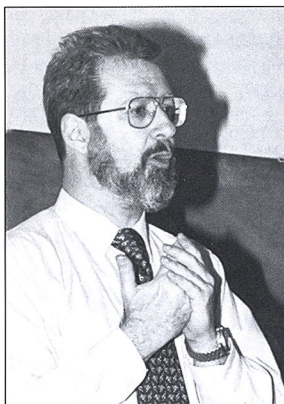
. *1er Menuet* of the *2e Concert*: *égales*. (This *pièce* is a standard case for *inégalité*, still more with the presence of triplets and suspensions: why most people play it *égal* is a mystery for me)

. *La La Poplinière*: *égales*

. *La Timide*, *2e Rondeau*, *1e Reprise*: *égales*

. *La Forqueray*: mostly *égales*, with only a few passages with quavers *inégaies*.

19. One should refrain to apply this conclusion to his earlier works, e.g. his solo harpsichord pieces, where the statistics does **not** hold true.



Claudio Di Veroli lecturing at the Conservatorio Statale Giuseppe Verdi, Torino, Italy, Dec.1998.

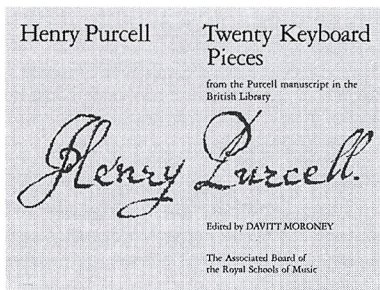
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