

Practical Considerations for Playing Daquin's "Noël Suisse"

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Pandemic context

Like many musicians, my work has changed dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic. I was scheduled to play a flute and organ recital with a friend on the afternoon of Sunday, March 15, 2020, that we were still planning to perform until Saturday evening. That Sunday was the last day of in-person worship at St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I serve as Cantor in the old German Lutheran sense of the term, directing the Chancel Choir and the handbell choir and playing organ and piano for worship services. Since March we have been producing pre-recorded services of morning prayer for Sundays in which my only musical responsibility is to sing the psalm of the day on a simple psalm tone so that people at home can sing along. Since we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, we know what those psalms are going to be well in advance, and we tend to record many of them in one session, meaning that I generally get all my worship music making done for the month in less than an hour. (This is all about to change—as I write this article, cameras and other equipment are being installed that will enable us to livestream worship services and my work will return to its accustomed Sunday morning worship routine with more organ playing.)

One of the opportunities of my new pandemic schedule has been making organ videos. There are two retired men in my congregation who are hobby videographers with the equipment and ability to set up multiple cameras with good lighting and then edit the footage together into a product that is much more professional than I could accomplish on my own. In the past I never had much interest in making audio recordings or videos unless I needed to do so for a job application, so this is new territory for me! I find making videos to be more stressful than playing worship services because I am more concerned about perfectly accurate playing that I am in a live worship service, where my focus is

facilitating the music making of others. Making videos is the safest way that I can provide organ music to members of my congregation at this time, and I have enjoyed having the time to learn new repertoire and polish favorite pieces.

One of the pieces that I decided to record is Daquin's "Noël Suisse," a piece that I have played almost every year sometime during Christmastide for many years now. Making a permanent record of my performance inspired me to try to answer some questions I've long had about the asymmetrical length of the variations and how to execute the piece most effectively on a modern organ. My research was at times stymied by the pandemic, with information tantalizingly out of reach. I'm looking forward to a time when I have access to a music library again, but I am thankful for the ever-expanding amount of information available online. Here are the fruits of my investigation.

What is this noel, anyway?

I am usually a pretty careful scholar about texts in the organ works I play, but I confess that in all the years I have played this piece for worship services, I have never taken the time to look up the original French carol. I discovered that there are two texts commonly associated with this tune: "Il est un petit l'Ange" and "Ô Dieu de clémence." I couldn't find a date for the origin of either text. The former text is explicitly a Christmas story, while the latter text is more a general prayer, although themes of the Incarnation are present, making it appropriate for Christmas usage. It has clearly eclipsed the other text in terms of widespread use; you can find many recordings and references to it online. I believe that Daquin probably had the first text in mind because it's a jolly Christmas carol that fits with the style of his piece. Balbastre also mentions the title "Il est un petit l'Ange" in his own setting of the carol, published less than two decades after Daquin's volume of noëls. I discovered a wonderful recording of this carol by Les Musiciens de Saint-Julien on Baroque instruments.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdq7hYeEI_A

The booklet that goes along with their CD provides the text in French, along with an English translation that is more poetic than literal.

<https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/AJ0266.pdf>

The text is an old Swiss French carol, telling the story of a child who is visited by an angel with an invitation to come and see the baby Jesus, cold and poor with no chests of money befitting his station as King of Glory. The boy replies that he has nothing to offer a King, but he does have good manners and knows how to be polite and greet the baby's parents correctly. He can also help wrap up the baby to keep him warm. It's kind of like a French version of "The Little Drummer Boy."

Available editions

Daquin's *Nouveau Livre de Noël's pour l'Orgue et le Clavecin* was published in Paris around 1757. The title indicates that it can be played both organ and harpsichord, which is common at the time due to the overlap of keyboard technique and to create a wider audience for the not inexpensive venture of printing volumes of music. The pieces here are more idiomatic for the organ, unlike the Noël's of Balbastre, which include more harpsichord techniques. Daquin's pieces are not identified by the carols on which they are based. Instead, like other French Classic era organ pieces, they are given titles that indicate registration. For example, the first piece is "I. Noël, sur les jeux d'Anches sans tremblant." , These titles further denoting their intended performance on the organ.

I recommend that everyone have the Dover collection *French Noël's for Organ* in their library. The economical volume compiles Noël's by Daquin, Dandrieu, and Balbastre. It's not the most up-to-date scholarship, but it's handy and the pieces are useful during Christmastide as preludes, postludes, or offertories. There are a couple of pieces that are not meant for Christmas (for example Dandrieu's "O Filii et Filiae," an Easter hymn), but the vast majority are Christmas carols. Most of them are variations

sets, a genre that is liturgically useful in its elasticity. Is the piece too long for your needs? Omit some variations! Did the offering take longer than expected? Add another variation! Page and measure numbers in this article will refer to the Dover edition.

Available on imslp.org are several scans of the 1901 Durand edition prepared by André Pirro. This is not an urtext edition. Registration indications are based on Daquin's registration, but need to be taken with a grain of salt and checked against the original. For example, Daquin indicates that the opening of 1. Noël is to be played on the cromhorne. Pirro adds "(Pos.)" before his cromhorne instruction. This makes sense as the cromhorne is most likely to be found on the Positif of a French classic organ. However, sometimes Pirro makes registration suggestions that don't reflect the original source. For example, in the 1. Noël, after the 2nd Double, Pirro prints, "(aj. le 16 P.)" but Daquin doesn't indicate that one should add a 16-foot stop at that point. This section is an echo passage, and beefing up the Great could help make that echo more effective. Pirro also suggests that the passages marked "Cornet" be played on the Récit with the box open, and the passages marked Echo be played on the Récit with the box closed. Given the layout of a large French classic organ, Daquin intended the "Cornet" passages to be played on the Positif and the Echo passages on the Récit or an Echo division if one were available. Pirro's editorial suggestions are effective on an organ without these resources, but they don't reflect Daquin's intentions, who would not have had any divisions under expression.

Pirro also includes elements like tempo indications that are not in Daquin's original publication. The first Noël is marked "Allegro moderato" and the second Noël is marked "Lentement et très tendre." These tempo indications could be helpful to performers who are unfamiliar with the French classic style, but shouldn't be seen as prescriptive since Daquin did not write them.

There is an urtext edition on imslp.org created by Pierre Gouin for Les Éditions Outremontaises in Montreal in 2007. This is a good, clean edition. Some pieces are available in two versions: an original

version that might prove to have some sort of obstacle to a modern performer and an updated version. For example, XI. Noel is available in a version with the pedal part in the original C-clef and a separate edition with modern bass clef.

Finally on imslp.org there is a scan of Daquin's original edition. As I was researching, I was overjoyed to find this, and then immediately disappointed because it is incomplete. Noël's 7-12 are not included, and No. 12 is the one I was recording. There is a facsimile of Daquin's original edition published by Anne Fuzeau Classique, but I couldn't get my hands on it quickly during the pandemic. Printed French scores of this era are generally pretty legible and fun to play from. Difficult for modern musicians can be clef issues, like French violin clef or alto clef. There are quite a few alto clefs in this Daquin volume, but perhaps that's a good opportunity to practice your clef reading!

A question of repeats

My biggest area of curiosity about Daquin's setting is the asymmetrical length of the verses. The structure of the original tune is AABA. The A section is 8 measures long, and the B section has 12 bars, so we would expect all the variations to be 36 measures long. None of Daquin's verses aside from verse 1 conforms to the AABA pattern. Daquin often blurs the boundary between the A and B sections of the melody by writing a little bit of fore-imitation, a kind of false entry of the A melody in the left hand while adding a change of registration that draws attention to the left hand part. For example, verse 2 features the right hand on the Grand jeu and the left hand alternating between Positif and Grand jeu. The variation begins with the hands on two manuals for the first A section, and then both on the Grand jeu for the second A section. The left hand moves to the Positif for the B section, but returns to the louder Grand jeu two bars before the A melody truly returns in the right hand.

Example 1: "Noël Suisse," mm. 61-68

Before I tracked down the carol, I thought perhaps this prominent left hand entry reflected the structure of the text, but that idea was not supported by the poetry.

Variation 2 continues with another B section with an echo effect created by moving both hands to the Positif and then the Récit. Daquin adds no repeated material for this echo; a change of manuals is simply added to create the echo effect. After moving to the quietest sound in the piece, we then return to two iterations of the A melody on the Grand jeu with pedal. All total, the form of the second variation is AABABAA. The procedure for variation 4 is identical, only the melodic material is enhanced by the edition of triplet figuration.

Example 2: "Noël Suisse," mm. 37-40 and mm. 129-1

Verse 3, however, at least in my Dover edition, does not follow the same pattern. It lacks the two extra repetitions of A on the Grand jeu with pedal. It is also missing the second A section at the beginning, making the form for verse 3 ABABA. The Pirro edition has the same issue, missing the second A section to make ABABA. Gouin makes up for the missing A by adding a repeat sign, but he adds a

second repeat sign not found in Dover or Pirro that would make the overall form of that variation AABABA. Here's where I run into the frustration of not being able to check the Daquin original, although in pieces of that period repeats and refrains are sometimes poorly marked, especially if the piece is based on a well-known tune that the composer expects to be familiar to the performer. Even if I could see the original print, it might not answer my question about repeats. For my recording, I chose to honor Gouin's first repeat sign, but not the second. My reasoning was that all the variations start with AA except for number 3, and it has always felt like that repeat was missing to me. I never felt like a second B section was missing in that variation, although now that I look at it, variations 2 and 4 do have two B sections. I'll chalk my decision up to bon goût more than scientific reasoning.

Two other published versions of "Noël Suisse" fail to clear up the repeat problem. Michel Corrette's *Nouveau Livre de noëls pour le Clavecin ou l'Orgue* (1741) is divided into suites of noëls. The keyboard technique sometimes skirts the line between organ and harpsichord, but leans more toward harpsichord in variations that feature lots of octaves in the left hand, for example. His setting makes the tune into a typical rounded binary dance form by using repeat signs, making the overall form AABABA. Balbastre's 1770 publication *Recueil de Noëls formant quatre Suites [sic] avec des Variations pour le Clavecin et le Fortepiano* follows the same pattern. I find it interesting that Daquin's version is published in the time between two versions that use rounded binary form. Perhaps this is because of the prevalence of rounded binary dance forms in harpsichord music, since both these other publications mention harpsichord first and Daquin places it second in the list of possible performing instruments.

Registering "Noël Suisse" on a modern organ

"Noël Suisse" is marked "Grand Jeu et Duo." To generalize, that means pulling out all the cornets and the full-length reeds on a French classic organ and coupling all the manuals together. On a typical three-manual French classic organ, you would find a cornet of some sort on both the Récit and the

Positif. The organ at my church is a 1921 Moller. I do have all the necessary stops for a cornet on the Choir, but not on the Swell. The Swell has a two-rank mixture that I sometimes can use to create the impression of a cornet, so I thought about using that for the measures marked “Cornet de Récit” in verses 2 and 4 (mm. 81-84 and mm. 193-196). I decided that I didn’t like the sound, though, because it was too loud to create the effect of an echo organ. Instead, I decided to play those measures on the Choir after changing a piston to remove the Swell coupler and the Choir clarinet (my stand-in for a French classic cromhorne). After those 4 measures, I then return to the original registration with all reeds and couplers.

The extra A sections after verses 2 and 4 of this piece call for a low A in the pedal. Some period organs had a “ravalement,” an extension of the pedal reed down to low A below the C that is typically the lowest note found on a pedal board. This is a thrilling sound! You can recreate the effect with a 32-foot pedal reed, but I don’t have one of those on my Moller. I often find my pedal stops not to be loud enough, so for this recording I used both the 8- and 16- foot pedal reeds, the 16-foot principal, and the 32-foot resultant. I also had all the manuals coupled to the pedal.

In my Dover edition, Variation 3 asks for a cornet on the Récit versus a cromhorne. Here I used the cornet stops on the Choir with the Swell oboe taking the place of the cromhorne. On other modern organs in my past, I have used the cornet on whatever manual it occurred in dialogue with a trumpet on another manual, but that balance didn’t work here on the Moller because the two trumpets on the Great are too loud to balance the rather reserved Choir cornet. The default basic registration that I learned for a duo is a cornet in the right hand with a grand cornet (cornet plus 16-foot flute) in the left hand. I can approximate that registration by using the cornet stops on the Choir for the right hand, and coupling the Choir and the 16-foot flute from the Swell (the only 16-foot manual stop on my organ) to the Great for the left hand. Given Daquin’s instruction of “Grand jeu et duo,” I wonder if he would have preferred this sort of duo sound without a reed for variation 3, the only variation that is a duo texture.

Perhaps I will try that registration when I inevitably decide to play this piece again next year during Christmastide. On the other hand, many French classic composers instruct players to use reeds in their duo registrations, so perhaps I will leave well enough alone.

Here's a link to the final product, at least this year's final product. I am coming to see the videos and recordings that I make as a snapshot in time rather than a definitive final product for all time. There are some moments that I wish had gone differently, but I have come to realize that even though I'm playing music alone, these videos are not just about my performance, but about the collaboration with the camera crew and the editing process. Sometimes there are filming issues with takes in which I like my playing better that make those takes unusable. I have come to realize that these videos have much in common with worship services, when my playing is more about accompanying cantors, choirs, and congregations than being a star performer. In this way, an activity that I thought was a completely new venture is still grounded in the communal collaboration that I value so much in worship services.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DSu0iYZqao>



Sister Stacie Lightner holds undergraduate degrees in organ performance and religious studies from the University of Kansas, as well as a Master of Music in church music. She earned her D.Mus in organ performance from McGill University. She also studied organ at the Hochschule für Musik in Lübeck, Germany on a Fulbright Scholarship. She has served as a church musician for over two decades in churches in Kansas, Montreal, Nebraska, and Minnesota. She is a deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a member of the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, so she uses the title “Sister.”