A Survey of Technique

The Frisé

Jonathan Curtis
August 2021

I.   Introduction

From the French style, the concept that I have incorporated the most into my own work is that known as the frisé. From the French either for 'frieze' or 'curled' (it is unclear which meaning gave its word to the drumming technique), the frisé is a single-stroke rudiment with various iterations based on the number of strokes involved, much like the measured rolls of the American tradition.

The word generally has two applications. Firstly, in the general sense, frisé refers to the single stroke roll as a basic sticking pattern. French drummers generally use the term frisé any time alternating strokes are played. Secondly, and far more interesting, is the term as applied to the numbered variations and the ingenuity with which they are applied.

This form of frisé has similarities with the closed ruffs and drags of the American tradition, and can itself be played closed or open, depending on how it is employed. Comprising a short flurry of a certain number of alternating single strokes, the frisé produces a short, sharp jump forward within the rhythm, or, if preferred, a stuttering effect, depending on how it is employed.

Its standard form presents as a note value half that of the subdivision in which it is placed. Within a 16th note rhythm, a frisé would commonly be played as 32nd notes, though this is by no means a rule. Frisés can be used to crescendo and anticipate accents, or decrescendo and tail off from an accent. They can be played acciaccatura, closed and lacking their own rhythmic value, or they can be played completely open and as part of the metered rhythm. This flexibility makes them so desirable for the composer and player alike.

While its ubiquity as part of the standard drumming repertoire makes it difficult to trace in any coherent manner, it certainly has its roots within the French military tradition. While, generally speaking, we may say that the American rudimental tradition favours open double strokes within its repertoire, the French style certainly gives much more sway to alternating sticking – the frisé and its myriad applications.

In exploring the work of Robert Goute (1919-2014), drum major of the Air de Paris, and published authority on French drumming, we find one of the most famous early examples of the application of this concept in the *Marches par Frisés*. Presented as a traditional march in Goute's third volume,[1] we see various applications of the frisé, dating back at least to the early 1800s. Goute himself, however, is clearly frustrated by the lack of reference or concise publication on this topic; he writes:

---

[1] Le Tambour d'Ordonnance Vol. III, (Goute, 1996 (1974))

> *"How is it that no one but Alexandre Raynaud has cared to compile a repertoire before? It took the master and his creative genius to make and bequeath to his contemporaries a series of pieces… to give its full dimension to an avant-garde technique which links the 'Marches par Frises'. As one looks to the old published methods: Marguery (1830), CARNAUD J (1870), BROUTIN H (1801), GOURDIN Ch. (1899), LAFFOND A. (1900), all of them, without exception, merely offer enumeration necessary to the use of "FRISE" – but none provides any information whatsoever on the past or present repertoire."*

He continues:

> *"It is not until the release of the hand written method of Alexandre Raynaud (2nd version) that one can better understand the repertoire's extension… It is known that the drummers marched at a fairly regular pace and that they used a slow pace for the parade. Precisely during these performances the 'Marches par Frisés' were most precious; their style and technique matching quite well the characteristics of the 'French Drummer School'."*

And finally:

> *"According to our archives, the drummers of the 'Régiment de Gendarmerie de la Garde' (1854-1860) were specialised in the art of beating this march style. It is a pity that those marches have never been published."* [2]

From these passages, a few things are revealed to us. Firstly, the frisé was in common usage at least as early as 1854, with various marches and parade pieces employing it, and the respective marching regiments specialising in its execution. Interestingly, it is tempting to credit an earlier date to this, with Goute referencing a certain H Broutin work from 1801. However, Broutin's *Méthod de Tambour* was published in 1889, so this is likely a typographical error. Nevertheless, considering the *Régiment de Gendarmerie de la Garde* were specialists in this style (purporting to marches containing ample use of the frisé), we can be confident in its inclusion in the repertoire well before the given year of 1854.

Instead, we can turn to more contemporary work to provide an even earlier date. The famed composed Joseph Tompkins, known for his three volumes of French-American rudimental solos, cites the work of André Danican Philidor in 1704 as a primary influence on his 4th, 6th, and 9th solos from his third volume. Indeed, these three solos contain the frisé, suggesting that it was in common usage as far back as the early 1700s.

Secondly, it wasn't until Raynaud (1876-1959) that we start seeing its usage written down and, latterly, published, in any uniform sense. Goute's frustration here is evident, since he asks why nobody before Raynaud cared to write it down.

The piece in question, the *Marches par Frisés*, is not the only one to contain the frisé itself, nor is it likely the oldest nor the first. However, it is a famous example of the French repertoire which focuses on this rudiment, though it sadly cannot be dated. As a piece, it comprises six sections in the typical 2/4 time, and makes consistent and interesting use of the frisé as both a technical concept and compositional theme.

---

[2] (Goute, 1996 (1974)), p. 162

Tourte (1895-1984) played with a more modern application of the frisé in his *Deux Variations*, but it is not until Lefèvre's *Le Tambour – Technique Supérieure*, published in 1987, that we see a more formal presentation of the frisé as we know it today. Lefèvre (1931-2004), one of Raynaud's proteges, presents, if not the first, certainly the most well-known text on the French rudimental style in an accessible format. In it, we see clear and concise instruction relating to the *coup de charge*, the *coulé*, and, crucially, the *frisé*. It is to its execution and application we now turn.

II.   Frisé Applications

As stated previously, the frisé appears as numbered iterations depending on the will of the composer. The single strokes are played at a faster rate than the underlying subdivision, often as the precursor to an accent or crescendo. The following are some examples from Lefèvre, demonstrating the traditional uses of the frisé concept:
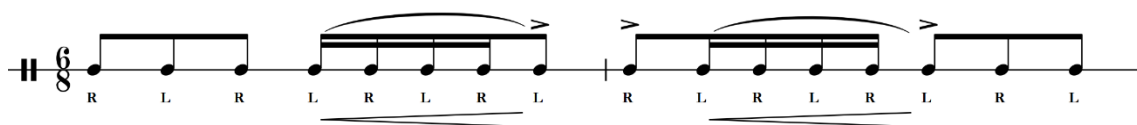

Figure 1

In this example, the *frisé de 5*, a five-stroke frisé, is employed in a similar way to an American five-stroke roll. The note value of the frisé is half that of the underlying 8th notes, and both instances precede accents as a crescendo.

In Figure 2, another *frisé de 5* is used, both as a decrescendo from, and crescendo to, an accent. Once again, the note value of the frisé itself is half that of the underlying subdivision. It should be noted that the use of the paradiddle sticking in the first and fourth beats is incidental, and is not related to the frisé figures themselves.

Figure 2

In Figure 3, a more complex instance is shown in which the frisé 5 forms part of a quintuplet. In a similar manner to the above example, the frisé both decrescendos from and crescendos to an accent, though this time its application within a tuplet emphasises an accelerando affect.

Figure 3

Progressing to the *frisé de 7*, in Figure 4 we see an instance of this rudiment performing a similar role to its American cousin, the seven-stroke roll. Once again, the single strokes are half the note value of the surrounding subdivision, and crescendo towards an accent.
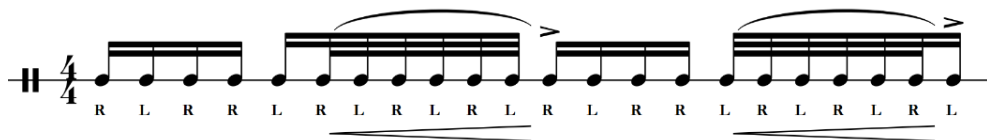

Figure 4

Moving away from Lefèvre briefly, one of my own favourite applications is the *frisé de 4*. Whereas Lefèvre's examples show this as 16th note triplets against 16th notes, I prefer placing this iteration as 32nd note triplets, providing a short, sharp alternative to a regular accent. Though optional, the use of the tenuto at the start of each frisé 4 further emphasises the implied accent.

As is somewhat customary to the French style, the frisé 4 can provide a subtle rhythmic twist to otherwise familiar figures. In this example, a standard frisé 4 is applied as 16th note triplets, nested within various 16th note tuplets:

Figure 5

Due to the underlying 16th note subdivision of each tuplet, the frisé occupies two 16th notes of whichever tuplet in which it is nested. While this particular example would sound decidedly odd, the individual figures, when applied in the relevant context it can provide an interesting French decoration to the standard tuplets.
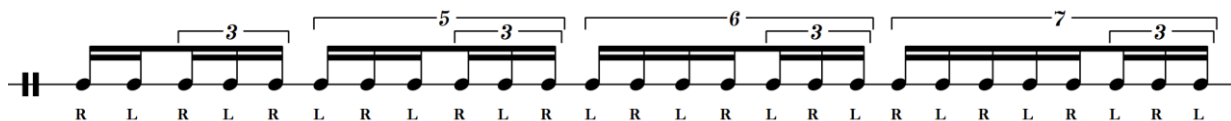

Figure 6

These examples (of which many more possibilities exist) serve to highlight the various frisé applications in an open context. The frisé, in a similar fashion to the American ruffs and drags, can also appear in a closed context, acting as an acciaccatura and lacking a dedicated note value of its own.

In Figure 7, two *frisé de 3* are shown as closed rudiments. Both act in the same way as the American drag, but are played with single strokes. As they are notated as acciaccatura, they occur immediately before the accent, without any rhythmic value themselves.

Figure 7

While conceptually similar, this closed frisé provides a characteristic *snap* when compared to the diddled drag. It can produce some interesting figures when placed within rhythmic phrases in this way.
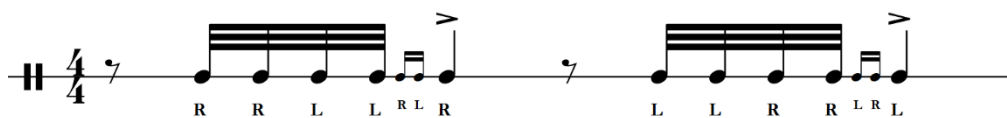

Figure 8

In Figure 8, we see a fascinating example from Lefèvre.[3] Here, a closed frisé 3 occurs immediately after an open double stroke roll and before the accent. It is as though the closed frisé has been inserted into an American five-stroke roll. The switch from open double to closed singles before the accent is very enjoyable to play and provides another characteristic French twist to an otherwise standard figure.
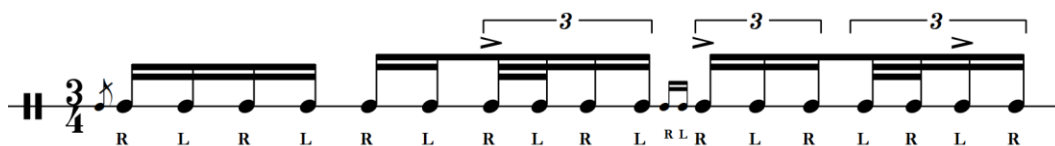

Figure 9

In this final example, Figure 9 shows two variations of a frisé 3 within triplet figures. In the first triplet, an open frisé 3 is played to emphasise the accent on the first 16th note; in the middle triplet, a closed frisé 3 is played just before the accent; in the third triplet, an open frisé 3 is played on the first 16th note to lead into the accent on the following 16th note. Lefèvre refers to this application as 'accentuate by turns on attack and on ending.'[4] This interesting example demonstrates the various ways that a simple frisé 3 can be applied within the same figure, and is once again characteristic of the French style.

III. Examples in the Repertoire

The following examples are from published repertoire, past and present, and serve to highlight various applications of the frisé.
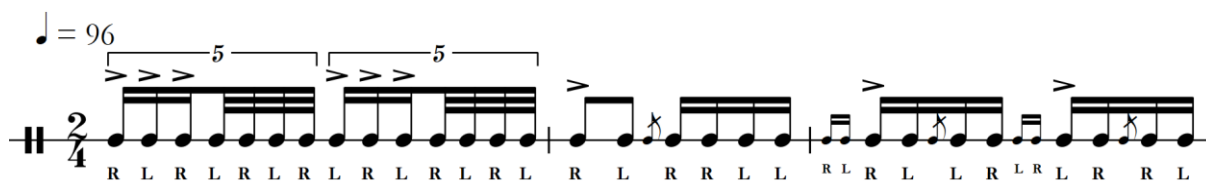
Extract from La Sauterelle [5]

---

[3] (Lefèvre, 1987), p. 23
[4] (Lefèvre, 1987), p. 23
[5] (Lefèvre, 1987), p. 50

Extract from Marches par Frisés [6]

Extract from Jata Path [7]

---

[6] (Goute, 1996 (1974)), p. 28
[7] © Artificer Productions, Jonathan Curtis, bars 8-10