

Alfred Cortot

Pianist, conductor, researcher and teacher, Alfred Cortot (1866-1962), was one of the most appreciated musicians of the in the first half of the 20th century. Cortot studied at the *Paris Conservatoire* with Émile Descombes (a pupil of Chopin) and with Louis Diéme (a pupil of Marmontel, one of the great teachers of the French school) and became one of the leading piano teachers of his time himself. He taught at the *Paris Conservatoire*, and then moved on to found the *École Normale de Musique*, which he presided until his passing. As a musician, Cortot's artistry was unparalleled. His performances of the great Romantic piano music as well as French piano music, were uniquely expressive, insightful and full of thought, delivered with his signature poetic and individual tone. As a researcher, Cortot's many books on music, as well as his *Edition de Travail* provided rare perspectives and tools for performers.

Alfred Cortot's playing stands out even amongst his fellow golden-age pianists. His unique sound and expression are instantly recognizable, and his interpretation strikes as both flexible and spontaneous and extremely profound. In holding up Cortot as a paragon of Chopin playing decades after his death, The New York Times described his method as combining "lucidity with spontaneity.... almost modern in its lack of sentimentality and attention to structure; yet it is unmistakably Romantic in its insistence on freedom and variety. Each line is suffused with subtle detail, interior contours and dynamic shadings. But these are not indulgent ornaments; they reveal rather than cloud the music's intentions." ¹

In Salzman's words, as she described in an interviewed I conducted with her only several months before her passing: "He did not play, he spoke on the piano. He expressed all human emotions." ²

Cortot's perception of music

As many great musicians of his generation and the generations before him Cortot's perceived music as a vehicle for the expression of superior meanings. In his book *In search of Chopin* Cortot quotes a few lines from Chopin's draft for his *Méthode des Méthodes*, written towards the end of his life, in which Chopin attempts to capture his intimate thoughts about **the profound meaning of music**:

The expression of thought by means of sound.

The indefinite (imprecise?) speech of man is sound.

The manifestation of our feelings by means of sound.

The indefinite language of music.

Art that manifests itself in sound is called music.

The art of expressing thought by sound.

The art of controlling sounds.

Thought expressed by sounds.

The interpretation of our perceptions by sound.³

It is not surprising that Cortot shared these same beliefs with Chopin, who was undoubtedly his most cherished composer, and the introduction to Cortot's interpretation book in filled with phrases such as: "awakening of sensation"; "the symbolic speech of sounds"; "the roots of music stretch downward into our inmost secret hearts"; "music must live in us and with us. It ought to reflect us."; "music must be the primary vehicle of our thoughts"; "[when you] make your fingers translate your ideas – you will then become an interpreter, not merely a performer." ⁴

¹ Edward Rothstein, *Classical view: How to Play Chopin? Cortot Had Answers*, (The New-York Times, Dec. 12, 1993).

² Pnina Salzman, Interview by Inbar Rothschild (recorded in Tel-Aviv, September 2006).

³ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, (Dublin, Cahill & Co., copywrite 1951 by the author), 49.

⁴ Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 13-21.

Cortot's interpretative approach

Accordingly, Cortot's approach to music making was based on **realizing its expressive intention**:

"In classes he dealt only with character and atmosphere," Salzman recalled, "I mean, how can one play without knowing the nature of a piece?" A clear understanding of the character was necessary in the lyrical parts as well as in the technical sections – "If someone was to play a passage meaninglessly, Cortot would say '*c'est correct*' and it was a terrible insult. It was forbidden to hear all of the notes, and that they would only be notes. It had to have a character, every passage."⁵

Cortot's research and analysis

In order to unravel this character, Cortot applied **research and analysis** as tools through which he believed interpreters could absorb the composer's expressive intentions. As a highly educated musician and one of the leading researchers of Romantic music and French music in the 20th century, Cortot occupied many roles, not only as a pianist, conductor, teacher, and arranger of music, but also as a writer of several books and editor of vast study editions (*Edition de Travail*, published by Salbert), where he provided commentary and advice on the music of Chopin, Schumann and Liszt. Cortot's scores offer unique insights into the interpretation of the great Romantic piano pieces as well as a deeper understanding to his own interpretation approach. His ideas are presented in such detail that in many cases a single musical line is followed by a whole page of commentary which includes poetic thoughts, narrative descriptions, phrasing suggestions and unique exercises that, apart from their marvellous technical virtues, shed light on the music's structure, texture, development and expression.

Cortot's profound knowledge and musical understanding were also demonstrated in the legendary interpretation course he taught to talented young pianists who later became world famous such as Dinu Lipatti, Clara Haskill, Samson Francois, Gina Bachauer, Vlado Perlemuter and Magda Tagliaferro. Each lesson was in fact a masterclass, for which students were required to prepare a piece, not only by playing it, but also by researching its background, structure and musical influences in order to gain a deeper understanding of its intended atmosphere, character and interpretation.

In the book '*Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*', Jeanne Thieffry, one of the students in the 1934 interpretation class, documented Cortot's accounts of the pieces that were played that year and described Cortot's guidelines for the students' research – a wide array which included:

- Composer's Surname, Christian names, place and date of birth and death.
- His nationality.
- The title of the work, Opus number, date of composition, and dedication.
- Circumstances which governed its composition (according to indications given by the composer).
- Plan (form, movements, keys).
- Outstanding characteristics (harmonic analysis, influences manifested, analogies, affinities).
- Character and meaning of the piece (according to the performer).
- Aesthetic and technical comments – directions for study and interpretation.⁶

Cortot's aim in this process was to **stimulate and clarify the pupils' personal vision**, asking them: "give me something to read which is *your own*. One does not invent the history of music; one learns it in books. But at least let your reading be digested, let me feel that you have assimilated its substance."⁷

⁵ Pnina Salzman, Interview by Inbar Rothschild (recorded in Tel-Aviv, September 2006).

⁶ Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 19.

⁷ Ibid, 21.

"In the lessons," Pnina said, "Cortot would explain **the background to the piece** before everything else: what year it was written, what happened to the composer and what mood he was in. He linked the music to the life of the composer."⁸

According to Cortot, knowledge of the composers' life experiences provides **insights into their inner emotional world and the intention/expression of their music**, and therefore should become an inseparable part of constructing an interpretation: "To interpret means to recreate within ourselves the work we are playing and we should certainly make no attempt at interpretation unless we try to put ourselves back into the conditions under which the composition was produced. Comprehensive *knowledge*, in other words, is absolutely essential if we are to understand thoroughly what we are about and avoid the chances of error. Obviously, since the nationality, the period, the individual character of the composer, the extent of his culture, the events of his life, his environment – even his reading – influence him in his creations, a knowledge of all these things is indispensable to the interpreter who aspires to make his music live again."⁹

Analysis of the music was also one of Cortot's requirement, but Cortot's desired analysis was far from being a dry and impersonal formulated practice. Although he was an in-depth music researcher, Cortot rejected any musical activity that had no emotional basis. Salzman expressed Cortot's dislike for the artificial and cold intellectual view of music in this anecdote: "Cortot said that anyone who analyses the harmony and structure of a piece without touching the character, becomes a post-mortem surgeon - makes an analysis to something which is already dead."¹⁰

Cortot expressed his own distaste for a dry, intellectual and uninspired view and treatment of music: In his book *In Search of Chopin* Cortot wrote a chapter entitled "Chopin the Pedagogue!" opening with an apology for the "repellent" association of the two words, which made him feel "instinctive revulsion": "Chopin a pedagogue? Chopin professor of the piano? Lecturer on some subject or other? Once it comes into contact with such a pedestrian phrase, the aura of idealism seems to fly off into thin air and the legendary atmosphere which has surrounded the composer for several generations vanishes."¹¹

With regards to Cortot's own requests for analysis, Thieffry explained Cortot's guiding principal: "**Has the performer reached a poetic understanding of the work?** That is what interests Cortot. That is why, attentive though he is to the accuracy of the pupil's answers, he detests cold 'dissections' which do not explain in the least degree the poetic significance of a work. To bring him what he calls a 'chemical analysis,' in which you have set out to enumerate, 'Subject A, bridge; Subject B, development of the beginning of A, etc.,' is not the way to win his approval. If it pleases him to see the musician moving easily among musical architecture, distinguishing the parts and naming them exactly, he is still more pleased to see him defining the character of a theme by some richly coloured epithet. Alongside the indication of a modulation or the figuring of a harmony he likes to find some words showing the expressive tendency, demonstrating to his satisfaction that the player has tried to understand it."¹²

Cortot required his pupils not only to recognize the musical elements, but to reveal how they serve as building blocks of emotion and motivate the music's expression. As an alternative to common analysis, Cortot's method wished "**to inspire in them [his pupils] the taste for intimate relationship between feeling and form, between analytical work and emotion.**"¹³

⁸ Pnina Salzman, Interview by Inbar Rothschild (recorded in Tel-Aviv, September 2006).

⁹ Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 16.

¹⁰ Pnina Salzman, Interview by Inbar Rothschild (recorded in Tel-Aviv, September 2006).

¹¹ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, (Dublin, Cahill & Co., copywrite 1951 by the author), 24.

¹² Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 19-20.

¹³ *Ibid*, 21.

The meaning of the musical text

Cortot perceived loyalty to the composers as devotion to the spirit their music conveyed, and not necessarily to the precise execution of each notated sign. He was upset with performers who resorted to formulated playing without reaching deep into the music and themselves in search for its meaning, and always sought to understand beyond the musical aspects of the piece and find out what stood behind it: "The roots of music stretch downward into our inmost secret hearts. We hardly dare to probe those depths of passion, pleasure, ecstasy, and pain. Too often we are content, if not through carelessness, at least through a curious sort of shyness, to say, 'Play louder, or softly; use this fingering do not forget that accent. It is absolutely essential.' Absolutely essential *for what?*"¹⁴

Salzman also spoke of this in our interview: "In Paris, if there was an instruction of *p*, it could be deleted and rewritten *f*. It was shameful to do everything that was written. The instructions of the composer were important, but there are fifty shades of *piano*, if something is marked *p* it does not mean that you have to play *dolce*, there is a *piano* that screams, *piano* that is despaired, a *piano* that is calm, a quiet, dreamy *piano*... One needs to know how to read the text – what it means."¹⁵

Personal identification

Lastly, Cortot always preferred **the integrity of the performer** over an ungenue/unconvincing playing that lacked sincere expression, and as much as he tried to be faithful to the composer, and attempted to research each piece from both inside and out in order to realize its original spirit, Cortot was willing to compromise this "authenticity" if it hindered the performers expressive integrity: "In every work the *music* must be the primary vehicle of our thoughts. If in the course of events we find external evidence confirming our feelings, we may rely upon this to some extent. But even if there exists an historical document establishing beyond question the emotional character of any given work, I do not hesitate to affirm that you should disregard it if it runs counter to your own personal feeling."¹⁶

¹⁴ Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 15.

¹⁵ Prina Salzman, Interview by Inbar Rothschild (recorded in Tel-Aviv, September 2006).

¹⁶ Jeanne Thieffry, *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, (New-York, Da Capo Press, 1989), 18-19.