

# Pnina Salzman

Pnina Salzman (1922-2006) was the first Israel-born pianist to achieve international fame and conquer concert stages throughout the world even before the establishment of the state of Israel. During a tour to Palestine, Cortot heard Salzman's playing and invited her to study with him at the *École Normale*, writing of her: "Cette enfant est la musique même." Though she was only a young girl, Salzman traveled to Paris and soon became Cortot's favourite pupil. She went on to perform worldwide in recitals, chamber music, and as a soloist alongside some of the greatest conductors of the era, to glowing reviews which praised her as one of the greatest musicians of her time. In Israel, she was regarded as "the First Lady of the Piano", a most cherished cultural ambassador and a great piano professor, who taught generations of young musicians, passing on the legacy of interpretation which was shaped by her studies with Cortot.

## Salzman's studies with Cortot

"Paris and Chopin and Cortot – all of it was for me one thing – magic. It was a special kind of life which was all poetry," Salzman shared in an interview towards the end of her life<sup>1</sup>. These special life circumstances were embedded in her character and beliefs and manifested in her music and teaching.

Salzman started studying with Cortot after arriving at Paris from Palestine, at the tender age of eight. Unlike other students, Salzman received private lessons with Cortot at his home in addition to participating in his interpretation course. However, she did not speak French at first, and so, as shared with me, she could only interpret the sounds, the tone and the gestures of her professor. Isolated from her homeland, her language and her peers, her entire world revolved around the music she loved.

Another remarkable fact was that Cortot never worked with Salzman on technique; the spirit of the music was all he spoke of, even at her very young age. This was so much the case that Salzman later mentioned that it was only after she graduated from the Ecole Normale and was invited to study with Magda Tagliaferro at the Paris Conservatoire, that she learned how to play the instrument itself. According to Salzman, Tagliaferro said Cortot taught her "how to fly," before she knew "how to walk."<sup>2</sup>

## Salzman's interpretative approach

It is not surprising, then, that Salzman's approach was absorbed by the same poetic and emotional images as Cortot's, and her perception of music was similarly connected to its **spirit and intention**. Music did not speak to her in sounds alone, it was immediately swept and absorbed by live images, sensations and emotions. She felt the expressive meaning of the music with great clarity and intensity and devotedly conveyed it in both her playing and teaching. Referring to her interpretation process, Salzman commented: "When I am working on a piece, I have to make sure that I can define in words the character of the piece and of each section within. If I cannot do that, then I consider that I do not know the piece."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pnina Salzman, Tel-Hai interview, 2006.

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

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Meir, *Pnina Salzman: Her Career and Interpretive Art*, (Doctoral Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2000).

Another key factor in Salzman's belief was that "**the spirit is stronger than the matter**," and that revealing the expression of a passage or a phrase is the key to unlocking its optimal technical and physical execution. **The execution was a natural manifestation of the music's spirit:** the choice of musical elements such as phrasing, touch and time derived from its expression; technical choices such as fingering and movement were also effected by their expressive possibilities.

### Research and identification

In her endeavors to study and interpret a piece, Salzman also believed in researching the composer's life and music in order to reach an **absolute identification** with both during the performance:

"In order to learn and understand, every composer, every new piece, it is not enough to practice alone.

One needs to read as well. To delve into the life story of every composer, to feel their atmosphere: what landscapes they lived in, what climate, what was the architecture around them, which authors lived in that era, to know them, who were the leaders of the people, what they loved, what they hated.

In other words, one must truly get into their skin, and put everything they went through into the performance of their pieces in keeping with the frame of their style and era. That is why a performing artist needs the utmost concentration. One needs to forget one's self and one's environment and live only within the art. Without this ability to concentrate no performance is complete."<sup>4</sup>

### Salzman's teaching approach

Unlike Cortot, Salzman never demanded that her own pupils research or analyze. She hinted at it at times but did not believe in forcing it. What she did demand, and obviously guided her approach was that **the text should never be viewed or executed plainly** – without the drive of an inner intention, even in the production of a single tone. Like Cortot, Salzman objected to a blind obedience to the score and at the same time renounced the use of purely "intellectual" ideas for the sake of innovation and stressed the idea that the spirit and *caractère* of a specific piece determine its interpretation.

In lessons, whenever someone played for Salzman, there was an unusual feeling, as if you entered a different realm. Salzman listened in **absolute concentration** tuning into the music. The atmosphere in the room was sacred. This, in and of itself, set a standard for us to apply ourselves to concentrate, focus, listen and aim at the intentions of the music.

After we played the entire piece, Salzman opened the score and took us through the markings she has made when we played. Her instructions usually delivered the bottom line – **the spirit of the music and the means of execution through which we might express it**, always linking the musical phrasing and execution signs to its meaning and character. Similarly to her own unusual upbringing, Salzman's teaching method could be compared to the absorbance of finely-tuned intuition, images, perception and work methods, by an apprentice who picks up the eye and the tools of his master as he works besides him, tuning our own ears and hearts to listen to, search for and express these intentions ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Pnina Salzman, Personal journals, ?.

### Basic principles of the method

1. **Revealing the expressive essence of the music** – through reading and research, and according to the performer's personal feeling/understanding.
  2. **Realizing the music's emotional/image/character intention** – the motivation to every musical/technical choice.
  3. **Synchronizing touch and movement with the musical intention** – in a natural flow of weight and release.
  4. **"Living the Music"** at the time of the performance.
- \* All, while **balancing, good taste and style** – maintaining beautiful tone, flow and proportions.

### Categorizing Salzman's comments

- **Metaphors of character/emotion/image to describe the music's intentions** – these touched us in various (and at times subconscious) ways, evoking different sensations which sharpened our perception of character, phrasing, tone, touch, development and construction of the composition, and enabled us to experience the music directly with great clarity. Using these metaphors enriched the conception of our possibilities as performers and also helped in our search for expressive tools, as the same metaphors also directed us to the appropriate movement, touch, phrasing and tone.
- **Tone and touch** – Salzman's comments drew from tactile sensations (such as warm, soft, deep), speech (such as speaking, singing, whispering) and emotions (such as gentle, generous, nurtured).
- **Phrasing and constructing** – an attentiveness for human speech and nature inspired Salzman to grasp musical form and development from subtleties of the phrase to the scale of the entire piece: speaking notes and musical phrases as words and sentences, and portraying whole sections, movements and even pieces, an unfolding journey through which she carried the listeners.
- **Arranging and choosing musical elements** (dynamics, time, articulation, pedal, breaths, texture) – according to Salzman, every musical/technical choice should be driven by an expressive motivation.
- **Maintaining good taste, balance and style** – these were usually comments of "don't", referring to the use of rubato, beautiful tone, clear pedal, etc., in cases of over-exaggerated or messy playing.
- **Technical markings** – passages in need of refinement, fingering, corrections of mistakes.