The Influences of Alfred Cortot on the Performance, Teaching and Research-editing of Piano Music from the Romantic Era

by

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A catalogue compiled by Dr. Charles Timbrell
(reproduced with kind permission)

Bibliography
Preface

Now that Alfred Cortot has been dead for more than a quarter of a century, one may ask: "Wherein lies the justification in studying the work of yet another dead concert pianist?" Many pianists these days dismiss Cortot as having been inaccurate in his later performances, considering him unworthy of serious appraisal in today's musical climate of so-called 'technical perfection.' This dissertation aims to show that Cortot was more than a fine virtuoso pianist who led his audiences into the sublime with his elucidating interpretations. His contributions to music are felt still today, not only within the 'milieu' of French piano playing, but widely across the sphere of western music.

There is no doubt that people who heard Cortot perform retain special memories of his playing. Those who studied with him retain a great admiration for his work and continue to spread his ideas through their own students. His recordings and publications are still treasured. But what was it that made him so special? We shall, in the course of this dissertation, examine in his piano playing the tonal qualities and colours, the rubato and characteristic rhythmic figurations which singled him out from others. Throughout all his work, however, one of the very significant features was concerned with the balance between intuitive sensitivity and musicality, that is, the emotional content of the art, and a deep intellectual approach not only to the music, but also to the associated cultural, stylistic, historical and technical backgrounds. This was unusual in musicians of his era. These are qualities which are still relevant today. Cortot remained a student all his life, and much of what he discovered is still being passed on.

Certainly he is one of the more controversial musicians this century has seen. Revered by some for the uncanny beauty of his piano playing, for his importance as a recording artist, chamber
musician, conductor, teacher, collector of music manuscripts, writer of books and articles on music, editor of working editions for piano students, founder of the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris and reformer of the French music education system, he has been otherwise held in notoriety for his alleged collaboration with the Nazi regime in occupied France during the last world war, for artistic licence in his pianistic interpretations, these days deemed by some to be excessive or unstylistic, and for the abundance of technical errors in some of the performances from the later part of his life.

The wealth of material concerning Cortot (his recordings, his writings, his collecting and editing activities, the numerous articles, books, references in books and radio programmes concerning him, as well as the wide dissemination of his teaching activities and conducting), justifies an examination of him as a major force in music this century, independent of personal opinion. An indication of his stature is reflected in the fact that, upon the occasion of his death in Lausanne on 15 June 1962 (at the age of 84), extensive obituaries appeared in both The Times and The New York Times, as well as minor reports in other publications such as Newsweek.

The object of this dissertation is not to undertake an exhaustive biographical study of Cortot, since this has already been done in varying detail by several writers (notably his late personal friend and biographer, Bernard Gavoty), but rather, to examine in pianistic terms his contribution in three areas: i) as a performer and interpreter; ii) as a teacher; and iii) as a researcher and editor. Nevertheless, it will be expedient to present in the Introduction a brief overview of Cortot's life and activities, before considering pianistic details.

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Introduction

Alfred Denis Cortot was born in Nyon, in French Switzerland, on 26 September 1877. Although of French descent on his father's side and of Swiss peasant stock on his mother's side, it could be argued that Cortot himself was to become eventually one of the century's greatest cosmopolitan personalities, rather than just a Frenchman. In the words of Bernard Gavoty: "Alfred Cortot was neither French nor Swiss, he was European ... a citizen of the world." It will be seen that the greatness of Cortot's legacy lies in the fact that his pianistic skills and aesthetic aims were outside the norm in France at the time. That Cortot was cosmopolitan rather than French is perhaps reflected in the fact that he 'retired' to Lausanne (in Switzerland) from Paris in 1947, to record and teach.

A cousin of Edgar Varèse, there were musical influences in Cortot's life from an early age. His two older sisters tutored him in music, one taught him the piano, the other solfa and theory. They were solely responsible for his music education until the age of nine.

In 1882 the Cortot family left Nyon for Geneva, remaining there until 1886 when they moved to Paris. In Paris, the nine-year-old Alfred sat for the entrance examination at the Conservatoire, but unfortunately was not admitted. The piano teacher Emil Decombes had noticed Cortot's abilities, however, and allowed the boy to attend his classes unofficially. Later, from 1892 onwards, Cortot was to study with Louis Diémer who, in the words of Roger Nichols "was a dry and precise pianist, whose style can never have been a model for Cortot." It was in Diémer's class that Cortot made the acquaintance of a contemporary student, Edouard Risler. Risler's


performance of Mendelssohn's *Variations Sérieuses* mesmerised Cortot, who later deemed it the single most important pianistic and musical determining influence he had experienced. Cortot gained official entrance to the Conservatoire in the class of Diémer, and completed his Premier Prix in the summer of 1896, with a performance of Chopin's F minor Ballade, among other works. For his efforts, he was awarded the prize of a Pleyel grand piano.

That same summer, Cortot was invited to Bayreuth for the first time, and this marked the start of an important influence on him. Together with his friend and colleague Risler, Cortot took part in a two-piano performance of Liszt's *Faust Symphony* before Cosima Wagner in the Villa Wahnfried. This was to be the beginning of Cortot's involvement with the heritage of Liszt and Wagner, engendering perhaps his predilection for Germanic music. It can help to explain why he had such a fine understanding of Liszt's B minor Sonata, and why he later introduced Wagner's works to Parisian audiences. Cortot subsequently spent the years 1898 to 1901 in Bayreuth, firstly as choral coach, then as assistant conductor under Felix Mottl and Hans Richter. It was at this time also that Cortot established his early reputation as a pianist, with performances in Germany and France of the piano concertos of Beethoven.

The legacy of Bayreuth was transferred to Paris in 1902, when Cortot conducted the Paris premiere of *Götterdämmerung*. Although the performance was received favourably by the audience and the press, it was a financial failure. Having underwritten the expenses, and owing 350,000 Ff, Cortot undertook playing recitals in order to repay the costs, thereby marking the birth of a great performing career which spanned 60 years. In 1902, he also formed the *Société de Festivals Lyriques*, which itself gave rise to a concert society, which in turn presented the first French performances of Wagner's *Parsifal* (a concert version), Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Brahms' *Requiem* and unpublished works by Chausson, Magnard and Roussel. In the same year, Cortot married Clothilde Bréal, who had been the first wife of the writer Romain Rolland. Cortot also became the director of concerts of the *Société Nationale*, and for a series of *Concerts Populaires* at Lille, in 1904.
The formation of the famous chamber trio with the cellist Pablo Casals and the violinist Jacques Thibaud took place in 1905, when all three were spending their summer holidays together in the same house in Fontainebleau. At first, they gave only private impromptu performances, but in years to come, they were in great demand, producing some of their finest chamber music recordings in the late 1920's, in what was then the new era of electronic recording. For nearly 50 years, the trio performed together, this being ended prematurely by the tragic death of Jacques Thibaud in an air crash in 1953. Cortot reminisced upon the trio in the 1950's:

"Later, in accordance with touching requests to come into contact with a wider audience, we did spend long hours in perfecting our instrumental technique and making our expression more eloquent or persuasive. But I can vouch for the fact that nothing was done at these times to modify our playing by means of premeditated discipline, and each one of us retained the privileges of his individual conception of any given work."

The year 1905 was also the year in which Cortot ceased writing his own compositions, having apparently composed a little previously.

4. Electric microphones, as opposed to the earlier megaphone types which operated by means of acoustic vibrations, began to be used in commercial recordings from approximately 1925 onwards.

5. Alfred Cortot; 16-page booklet accompanying the sound recording of the Trio No. 1 in G major, Op. 73, No. 2 by Haydn, and the Trio No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 99 by Schubert; Performers: Pablo Casals (cello), Alfred Cortot (piano) and Jacques Thibaud (violin); long-playing re-release of original 78's; record COLH 12 in the Series 'Great Recordings of the Century' (London: The Gramophone Co., late 1950's); p. 13.

Cortot's teaching career commenced in 1907 with his appointment as Professor of piano at the Conservatoire in Paris where he took over the senior class for girls. He held this position for ten years, although he did not resign officially until 1919 after undertaking a concert tour of the USA in 1918. In his ten years at the Conservatoire, Cortot taught many students who were later to become famous concert pianists in France.

Cortot was a man of resolute character, and in 1910 he became involved in an argument with the Paris Musicians' Syndicate. It appears that he held some basic objection to large artistic bodies, and his membership was eventually suspended. 7

In 1914, Cortot was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour.

Between the years 1918 and 1926, Cortot undertook 6 highly successful tours of the USA. The second of these, in 1919-20, was quite remarkable for the mammoth size of the repertoire Cortot performed. The tour encompassed 49 concerts in 3 months, and whilst Cortot had prepared 4 different programmes for the various solo recitals, he also performed the 5 piano concertos by Beethoven in 2 programmes at Carnegie Hall, Saint-Saëns' fourth concerto, the concerto in A minor by Schumann, and the third concerto by Rachmaninoff. As a pianist, Cortot commanded a very extensive repertoire of works, and it was not uncommon for him to present large recital programmes.

The period between the two world wars was the time when Cortot was most prolific with his professional activities as a pianist, recording artist, conductor, administrator and organiser. Two of the orchestras he founded at this time were the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris and the Orchestre de l'Ecole Normale. One of the most significant things Cortot was to do in this same period, was to found the Ecole Normale de Musique, in 1919, together with Auguste Mangeot.

7. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
The new school became a formidable alternative to the established Conservatoire, and has had influence on French music education to this day. Cortot appointed the composer-conductor Nadia Boulanger to her first important teaching post, which included teaching composition. This in itself was an important break with tradition, as Boulanger was the first woman to teach composition in a conservatoire in Paris. Other members of the distinguished staff of the Ecole Normale included Marcel Dupré and Igor Stravinsky. As conductor of the orchestra of the Ecole Normale, Cortot made himself responsible for the performance of many modern works. He continued his conducting activities on a sporadic basis until 1940. Most importantly, however, Cortot presided over the Ecole Normale from its inception until his death in 1962. The workload of retaining two major posts at the one time proved too difficult for him, and in 1919 he resigned from the Conservatoire.

Cortot was to be the recipient of yet more honours from the French government: in 1924, he was made Officer of the Legion of Honour, and in 1934, Commander of the Legion of Honour. He also founded the Société de Musique de Chambre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in 1934.

Cortot's activities during the second world war were to cast a shadow over the rest of his life, and he was never able to shake it off entirely. Whether Cortot was really a 'collaborateur' with the Nazis, or whether he seized the opportunity to unite the cultures of France and Germany is a complex issue, and for many, highly emotional. It is difficult for us today to know the whole situation, since the accounts of his students, friends, colleagues and family differ so greatly from one another. Suffice it to say that Cortot's actions were doubtless controversial. Without entering into the argument, it is nonetheless appropriate to relate some of the known facts, which are relevant in the context of this biographical overview. It is indisputable that Cortot was active in the cultural affairs of the collaborationist Vichy government. In 1941, he accepted the post of Commissioner of Fine Arts in this government's Ministry of Education. He also conducted the orchestra of Radio Paris, which was then under Nazi control. In 1941 he undertook a
tour of 12 concerts in Germany at the request of Fürtwängler, the conductor. These facts condemned him as a 'collaborateur' in the eyes of many. On the other hand, there is differing evidence, which would seem to contradict this. In 1933, Cortot became one of a number of musicians, including Thibaud, Bronislaw Hubermann and Josef Hoffmann, who refused to appear in the concert halls of Germany because of the rise of anti-semitism there. On similar grounds, he cancelled a concert in Italy in 1939. A fact not publicised by German propaganda was that Cortot only accepted the concert tour of Germany on the condition that he be able to play also for the French prisoners of war in the German prison camps.⁶ Although these conflicting facts make it difficult to be conclusive about Cortot's intentions, the results themselves were undeniable. He was hated by many, including even some of his students. For many years, Vlado Perlemuter, the famed interpreter of Ravel's piano works, refused to speak to him, and Clara Haskil never spoke to him again.⁹ His old friend, Pablo Casals, was similarly angered, although he apparently forgave Cortot in the 1950's, at the instigation of his (Casals') young Cuban wife.¹⁰ Cortot's own (adopted) son, Jean, also distanced himself from his father.¹¹ At the end of the war, Cortot was briefly imprisoned as a result of his war-time activities, and banned for a year from public performance. Public opinion against him remained so strong, that in January 1947, as he walked on stage in Paris to perform Schumann's piano concerto, the orchestra stood up and walked off in protest. Cortot later sued the orchestra, and eventually won the case. The high cost of pursuing a court case took its toll on Cortot's financial resources however, and it was primarily for this reason that Cortot again embarked on a hectic touring schedule quite late in his life.

⁸. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
⁹. David Wilde, in an interview with the author, reported that Perlemuter eventually forgave Cortot.
¹⁰. David Wilde.
¹¹. David Wilde.
Another important event in Cortot's life during the early war years concerned his health. His eyesight had deteriorated to the extent that he had to have a cataract operation. As a result of the operation, Cortot became a morphine addict and later, a chain smoker. It is possible that these factors were to influence the performances from his last years, specifically his failing memory and technique.

In 1947, Cortot's wife died and he then married Madame Renée Chaine, adopting her son Jean from her first marriage. In the same year he retired from Paris to Lausanne (Switzerland) as his enthusiasm for Paris had waned. In Lausanne he continued to record and teach. In 1949 he was a member of the founding committee of the Busoni piano competition in Bolzano, Italy. His concert engagements increased to a total of 135 appearances in the year 1952, when he was 75. Cortot gave his last public performance on 10 July 1958, together with Pablo Casals in Prades, playing Beethoven's A major cello Sonata and the Variations on a Theme from The Magic Flute.

He died in a Lausanne hospital on 15 June 1962, from uraemia, at the age of 84.
CHAPTER ONE

Cortot’s contribution as a performer and interpreter of romantic piano music

It is probably as a performer that Alfred Cortot made his greatest impact. With a performing career that spanned 60 years and 6,000 recitals in many countries on various continents, as well as substantial recording activities, Cortot’s performances have been heard by countless audiences to this day. In his own day, Cortot was greatly respected and admired by both audiences and colleagues. He was a friend of both Edwin Fischer and Wilhelm Kempff, he admired their work, and they in turn admired his. Today it is still his beauty of tonal control, sensitivity of phrasing, controlled rubato, characteristic rhythmic figurations which did not spoil the overall conception of a work, and his sophisticated use of the pedal which place him high in the esteem of modern concert pianists. For example, the Viennese pianists Alfred Brendel, Paul Badura-Skoda and Jörg Demus have all been known to cite Cortot’s performances for their great insight and beauty.

Cortot had an intimate understanding of the piano music of the Romantic era. Already in the 1890’s, when he performed the concertos by Beethoven in Paris, he was admired as an interpreter of Beethoven’s music. He also understood Liszt’s music well, the B minor Sonata in particular, and this surely stems from his experiences at Bayreuth. He was a specialist in the music of Schumann, and it was his ideal wish to bring German music and culture before the French public. Concerned with evoking images and creating atmospheres, he was a great interpreter of Debussy also. As a friend of Debussy, one could even conjecture that he actually influenced him, although this would be difficult to prove. Above all, however, Cortot was known foremost for his interpretations of Chopin. His affinity with the music of Chopin can be traced back to his student days at the Conservatoire in Paris. His first teacher there had been Emil Decombes, who had taken lessons with Chopin at the end of the composer’s life. In 1896, when Cortot performed at his final examination at the Conservatoire, and was the only student in that year to be awarded the Premier Prix, one of the works he performed
was Chopin’s fourth Ballade in F minor. Apart from these interests in particular composers, Cortot possessed an extensive repertoire of Romantic music. A glance at the discography prepared by Charles Timbrell (see Appendix) will indicate that Cortot’s repertoire comprised not only a substantial number of important Romantic works, but also lesser known and new works, and this still does not account for the many works which Cortot played, but did not record, for example, the Variations on a Theme of Händel by Brahms.

The evidence by which we can gauge Cortot’s contribution as a performer stems from people who studied with him, from those who heard him play, from those who have studied his life’s work and his recordings. The latter form an important part of his legacy today for those of us who were not able to have heard him in person. As mentioned previously, it was Cortot’s beauty of tone, phrasing, controlled rubato and pedalling skills which were the hallmarks of his style. Before going into detail however, it will help to consider something of the style of French piano playing at the time, a style from which Cortot obviously departed.

Magda Tagliaferro (1893-1986), a student of Cortot, stated in an interview with Charles Timbrell:

"Cortot didn’t like the technique of his teacher Louis Diémer ... Diémer and the Marmontels ... had firmly established the notion of fast, super-articulated playing: light, transparent sounds produced with minimal wrist and arm motion. The fingers were high, but they never really felt the bottom of the keybed! Marguerite Long inherited and passed on that style: fast, digital playing that was semi-legato and without much pedal. The sound was thin and uninteresting. Cortot’s conceptions involved much more arm, and also more legato – a really more harmonious approach in every way."12

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Another French student of Cortot, Eric Heidsieck (b. 1936), supported Tagliaferro's remarks in saying that the norm of piano playing in France at the time when Cortot was a student concerned itself with very clean finger work, and only sparse use of the pedal.\textsuperscript{13}

In summary, the style of piano playing which Cortot doubtless encountered as a student in the Conservatoire would have been exemplified by high fingers and much articulation, resulting in a dry, finger-articulated brilliance, which Perlemuter described as "notey playing."\textsuperscript{14} Cortot detested this style, and his approaches with regard to technique, tonal control and pedalling departed significantly from it. For one thing, Cortot sat very low, which was contrary to the traditional French manner. Despite this, he was nonetheless able to attain clarity of articulation and great velocity, exemplified in his acoustic recording of Mendelssohn's \textit{Rondo Capriccioso}\.\textsuperscript{15}

Not only was the traditional French style light in sound, but, some would say, light in emotional depth also, whereas Cortot's playing was both intellectually and emotionally involved. His aim was to unite the whole being and intellect in a performance.

The single most important feature of Cortot's style was the sound. It was characterised by a great sensitivity and elegance. His superb legato and beauty of tone control contributed to a cantabile style, which has stood the test of time, having been admired by countless pianists all over the world. Whenever people who had heard Cortot perform were asked what it was that impressed them the most, it was always his sound that they mentioned. With his sound, Cortot was aiming at quality, not quantity, so that although his melodies were often penetrating, his overall sound level was not excessive. In this respect, he was similar to Chopin. Cortot

\begin{flushleft}
15. Acoustic recording (pre-1925), Victor 6358.
\end{flushleft}
produced a broad, singing cantabile, apparently with relaxed wrists and flat, cushioned fingers. Many of his students remarked that he placed great importance on playing on the 'cushion' of the finger when trying to project a melody. Whilst using this so-called 'cushion technique', Cortot made his hand solid, and had arched knuckles and straight fingers, thereby allowing him to transfer all his energy to each single key in a melodic passage. Liszt had earlier used this technique also, but it was certainly outside the parameters of French piano playing in Cortot's day.

An examination of his Student's Editions (Editions de Travail) will show several examples to illustrate the importance Cortot placed on producing cantabile sound from the 'cushions'. For example, in connection with Chopin's Waltz in A flat major, Op. 42, he wrote: "The intense ardor [sic] of this episode should be played with a vibrant \textit{mf}. Think of the timbre of the violin, playing on the G string ... Play on the flat cushion of the fingers. Press, do not hit."

![Musical notation](image)

**Ex.1:** Chopin: Waltz in A flat major, Op. 42 (ed. Cortot).

16. Recounted to the author by Max Cooke.


Of the Etude in C minor, Op. 25, No. 12, also by Chopin, Cortot recommended: "One should endeavour to make the accents on the held notes rather by pressing the fingers on the keys than by striking them."¹⁹ A natural consequence of playing in this manner was a finely controlled finger legato. Cortot commented upon Chopin’s Nocturne in B flat minor, Op. 9, No. 1: "During this preparatory work, take care to leave the fingers as long as possible in contact with each of the keys used, so as to attain ... a legato independent of the pedal."²⁰

Cortot’s students relate that he made continual references to orchestral colours in piano playing. Apparently, the importance he placed on the imagination of tone colours contrasts also with the mainstream of French playing at the time.²¹ He himself was capable of producing a huge palette of tonal colours. His flexible right hand especially enabled him to achieve this. His wonderful cantabile tone was doubtlessly further consolidated as a result of his ensemble experiences, in accompanying the soprano Felia Litvinne, in conducting, and in playing chamber music with Casals and Thibaud. Cortot once wrote:

"My colleagues taught me the art of making the piano sing. They suggested a thousand ways to forget the percussive sound of the instrument, just as my experience with orchestras exercised and developed my ear. By imitating them I was able to try varying the symphonic timbres of my piano, to give a melody in the middle register the colour

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²¹. According to the reports of many people who studied with Cortot.
of a trombone, or a motif in the treble the amorous sonority of a flute. I learnt more from accompanying great singers than from toiling over a difficult run."

A prime example of Cortot's orchestral approach can be heard in his playing of the opening lines of the third movement of Beethoven's Archduke Trio in the recording made in 1927 with Casals and Thibaud.

The question of balancing the tone levels of various 'parts' in the music, and in the context of the overall volume level, also set Cortot apart from many of his contemporaries. In the octave Etude in B minor, Op. 25, No. 10 by Chopin, Cortot advised the pianist to create the illusion of legato, by employing dynamic contrast, and thus avoiding a permanent fortissimo. He is known to have described power as "... a question of rhythm and timbre, not sheer sound volume." Like Chopin, Cortot was able to produce effects of great power, but he did this through rhythmic drive and judicious use of crescendo, rather than simply volume alone. His sonorous fortissimos were the result of a careful balancing of the outer and middle parts. Of his pianissimo, his student Nina Walker remarked: "... his pianissimo ... was like a great actor with a stage whisper ... then ... the fortissimo was enormous by comparison, and he always stayed in quality and never went into quantity ..." In fact,


23. HMV/EMI DB 1223/7.


26. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
Cortot's overall sound level was actually less than that of many of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, in a review of Cortot's Armistice Day (1918) recital in Carnegie Hall, the New York Times critic Richard Aldrich, complained that Cortot was often too loud, that his sound could be as "pointed as an icepick."\(^\text{27}\) Perhaps this indicates that Aldrich was referring more to the melodic line, rather than the overall sound level.

In striving for such a sophisticated control of tonal levels, Cortot employed pianistic techniques foreign to the traditional French school of playing. He placed just as much importance on the roles of the hand and the wrist in playing, as on the fingers themselves. Although his fingers were often close to the keys, the independence and clarity of his finger work was excellent. He used the arm more than some other pianists of his time, but was somewhat limited in this regard, because he sat low and near to the keys. Of his technique Perlemuter related: "Unlike some pianists then, he didn't just have one kind of technique. He constantly adapted his technical approach to the music."\(^\text{28}\) This seems consistent with Cortot's opinion that no interpretation was definitive, explaining why he often played the same passage a different way each time.

Cortot continually stressed in his Student's Editions that abrupt attacks from high fingers should be avoided. His notes accompanying Chopin's Etude in A flat major, Op. 25, No. 1, advocate a very flexible wrist, and the use of the fifth (i.e. little) finger of the right hand to play the melody, which would seem to imply the use of the 'cushion technique' and the involvement of the hand, as opposed to raised fingers.\(^\text{29}\) Similarly, Cortot wrote of the Etude in F minor, Op. 25, No. 2, that "The fingers should remain in close contact with the keyboard and should not be raised forcibly."\(^\text{30}\)

\(^{27}\) Richard Aldrich, 'Alfred Cortot Plays: Parisian Pianist is Virile and Brilliant, but Too Often Hard', The New York Times (Tuesday, 12 November 1918), p. unknown.

\(^{28}\) Charles Timbrell, 'Alfred Cortot ...', p. 23.


\(^{30}\) 'Ibidem, p. 13.

In support of the idea that he had more than one technique, it can be mentioned that he advocated Rameau's harpsichord method.\(^{31}\)

Cortot was also aware of playing 'on the escapement', rather than just on the surface of the keys. Of Chopin's Nocturne in F sharp major, Op. 15, No. 2, he suggested:

"A normal amount of finger articulation here would give an altogether inappropriate impression of dry brilliance. To suggest the fluttering quality of this passage, keep the fingers at key level, using a minimum of attack, and try to arrest the release of the keys at the first escapement."\(^{32}\)


32. Alfred Cortot (Ed.), Chopin: Nocturnes, Volume 1, p. 29.
This indicates that Cortot played deep into the key, not just on the surface. He elaborated further, in his notes on Chopin’s Etude in C sharp minor, Op. 25, No. 7:

"Keep the fingers of the right hand which are playing the accompanying part in contact with the keys throughout, in order to prevent any abrupt attack. By practising in this manner, it will be possible on double escapement keyboards to emit the sound with utmost softness by not letting the keys come back to their original position."


Obviously Cortot was aware that a sensitive range of tonal gradations was possible when one played ‘on the escapement’, thereby being able to control the speed of key descent more effectively. In relation to the Prelude in E minor Op. 28, No. 4, of Chopin, he expressed similar sentiments: "Reduce the movement of each finger in action, to a minimum, and let it retain permanent contact with the key after pressing it down, ... it must feel the key coming back into position beneath it."


Often Cortot employed fingerings which favoured the part writing of the music, rather than technical ease or safety. He referred to this as the "doigté de sensibilité" versus the "doigté de sécurité." The opening of his solo piano arrangement of Bach’s D minor organ Toccata and Fugue shows such a preference in the second group of right hand semiquavers, where the fingering 5 4 3 2 3 5 requires an awkward shift of hand position, when perhaps 5 4 3 1 3 5 would have been easier. Cortot obviously wished to avoid stressing the thumb on the D, preferring instead to use the second finger. His concern for a sense of line and phrase came before technical ease and security.  

Quasi improvvisata ma risoluto


35. Related to Roger Nichols in 'The Poet of the Piano ...', by Jean Bérand, a technician for some of Cortot’s recordings.

Neither was Cortot afraid to use thumbs on black keys. For Chopin's Etude in F major from Op. 10, he recommended:

"Use the thumb on the black keys both in scales and arpeggios throughout this work. Indeed the old rule has been discarded by modern technique which prefers fingerings based on the requirements of musical expression rather than those which afford comparative physical convenience."\(^{37}\)

It was this kind of concern for every note within a texture and the careful measuring of every polyphonic line, which resulted in Cortot's excellent control of polyphonic writing and orchestral timbres. Each part of his textures was thus expressive and rhythmically independent. Henry-Louis de La Grange aptly described the effect of Cortot's part playing as "... an impression not of 'clusters' but of a variety of instruments playing together."\(^{38}\) A splendid example of the independent control of every part, whilst still retaining the overall conception of the phrase, can be heard in the opening chords in Cortot's recording of the Prelude, Aria and Finale by César Franck.\(^{39}\)

In his use of pedal, Cortot was also innovative for his time, particularly with regard to what we today call 'flutter pedalling.' For example, in the Etude in F minor, Op. 25, No. 2 of Chopin, Cortot encouraged much more frequent flutter pedalling (i.e. quick, half changes of the pedal) than originally indicated by Chopin, due to the "sonority of modern instruments."\(^{40}\)

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39. HMV/EMI DB 1695/7, 1931.

The original editions have the sustaining pedal marked as to be pressed down at the beginning of each bar and released only at the end of the bar—except when the harmony changes.
Considering the sonority of modern instruments, we have thought it advisable to lighten these directions.
If the foot be supple enough, we recommend the following modifications:

which, besides ensuring to the harmonic structure the evanescent character required for the rendering of this Study, affords at the same time excellent rhythmic practice.


Similarly, for the left hand accompaniment of the Etude in E flat minor, Op. 10, No. 6, Cortot called for a change of pedal on each semiquaver, what he called "a kind of interrupted quivering." 41

Flexibility of the foot will be improved by increasing very gradually the swiftness of the motion; when performing, this use of the pedal will be no more than a regular beat, a kind of uninterrupted quivering.


This same intricate flutter pedalling was recommended again by Cortot for the E major Etude, Op. 10, No. 3:

"... the pedal, ... should be used almost exclusively for bringing out the melodic line. Consequently, avoid using it in an elementary manner, extending it over whole harmonic groups; it should ... be changed frequently, and the intervals necessary to lift it between beats should be as short as possible." 42

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42. Ibidem, p. 22.

Apart from flutter pedalling, there were several other ways in which Cortot achieved special effects with his pedalling. He often juxtaposed various piano textures, employing the pedal differently in adjoining sections of a work. In his recording of Chopin's Waltz in C sharp minor, he varied the pedalling upon each return of the second main section.  

Ex. 10:  Chopin: Waltz in C sharp minor (ed. Cortot).

43. HMV/EMI DB 1695/7, 1931.
At times he would even omit the use of the pedal entirely, his second recording of the last movement of Chopin's B flat minor Sonata being a notable case in point, where he wished to achieve the effect of sinister gusts of wind howling over the graves.44

It was not uncommon for Cortot to use una corda in passages marked mezzo-forte and even louder, in order to obtain a sound which was soft, yet sonorous. At other times, he depressed the sustaining pedal before playing the keys, thereby obtaining extra fullness in the sound. The most common usage of the sustaining pedal in Cortot's day was the syncopated pedal, i.e. depressing the pedal just after the keys.

Thinking in terms of orchestral and other non-pianistic tone colours also affected Cortot's pedalling. In reference to the final unison C octave in the bass of Chopin's Etude in C major, Op. 10, No. 1, Cortot proposed: "Here a slight vibrato of the pedal will secure the 32-foot sonority of the organ for this final note."45 With pedal, as with his finger techniques, Cortot's first considerations of the music were concerned with the quality of sound, and this in turn determined the various pianistic techniques he employed.

Rubato was also a special interest of Cortot's. He could produce an exciting rubato, which, far from losing the basic rhythmic drive of a piece, allowed the rhythmic unity to remain. The effect was one of apparent spontaneity, but it was in fact based on a strict discipline of rhythm. Like Chopin, and even Mozart before him, Cortot stretched the time with the right hand, whilst maintaining rhythmic security with the left hand. In his 1949 recording of Chopin's Berceuse, Op. 57, we can hear how the piece seems to 'breathe' naturally in the right hand phrases, while the underlying rhythm of the lullaby never falters.46 He always advised his students to explore other means of special effect before resorting to rubato, emphasising that where it was used, it had to be disciplined.

44. HMV/EMI DB 2019/20, 1933.
46. HMV/EMI DB 21175.
One reason why Cortot produced such a sophisticated rubato was his innate understanding of musical structure, further enhanced by careful study and consideration of the score. His pianistic interpretations seemed to unfold naturally, with each episode seeming to lead logically into the next. This was because he considered carefully all details in the music he played, and he always allowed his performances to 'mature' fully, prior to playing before an audience. He considered small details, however, to be subordinate to the overall sense of structure: if Cortot made a mistake, he wouldn't improvise a convenient rubato, he would drive on, to preserve an unbroken emotional line and formal structure.\(^7\) Sometimes this led to even more mistakes. Cortot always placed more importance on musicality than on right notes.

Cortot's mistakes however, must be seen within the context of his entire performing career. In fact, he possessed a very fine technique at least until World War Two. From a pianistic point of view, Cortot was not physically well disposed to piano playing. He himself remarked of his technique: "I had a bad hand, inadequately muscled, with a small span and weak fingers. I could barely reach the octave ... I worked so hard, Léa [his sister] coached me so well that in time I overcame some of my handicaps."\(^8\) Like some great achievers in other fields, Cortot was able to turn a disadvantage into a strength through his single-minded dedication. He always had to practise a great deal, and Roger Nichols commented that Cortot's technique "was the result of a solid four hours' practice every morning, at least until 1939."\(^9\) A cursory glance through Cortot's book on technique, Principes Rationnels de la Technique Pianistique, or his Student's Edition of the Etudes of Chopin will show that he held many ideas on technique and was not afraid to commit himself to thorough technical practice. At its best, Cortot's technique was up

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to the standards of today, with a fine clarity of articulation and finger work, as well as velocity and strength, and with the added ability of producing a wide range of tone colours. The recordings he made in the 1930’s in particular testify to his great technical proficiency. Although many concert pianists of the day possessed dazzling virtuoso techniques in terms of sheer volume and velocity, Cortot was one of few who coupled virtuoso qualities with artistic sensitivity and refinement.

For various reasons however, his technique deteriorated in the 1940’s and ’50’s. He was by then already 70 years old, and it would seem that his muscular co-ordination deteriorated as he grew older. 50 But there are other factors also. It is likely that some of his mistakes were due to failing memory, and it has been suggested by some that Cortot’s memory lapses, perhaps always present, were due to the fact that he did not have an adequate knowledge of the harmonic structures of the music, although this is a debatable point. 51 Any deterioration he may have suffered in muscular co-ordination would have been heightened by his preference for sitting low and near to the keys. His eyesight was poor, even after the cataract operation, and he was loathe to wear spectacles. 52 He probably suffered a loss of nerve too. This may have been due partly to his addictions with morphine, then to cigarettes, and later to the trauma of the allegation that he was a ‘collaborateur’ with the Nazis, to the associated lawsuit, and to the fact that his own son, together with some of his friends and colleagues, disowned him. Therefore the performances and recordings from his late years should not be taken to be representative of his technique at its best.

50. Max Cooke, in a discussion with the author, recalled Cortot’s demonstration of Schumann’s Traumeswirren in a masterclass in Paris around 1950. Cooke reported that, whilst Cortot’s poetic message was clear, he was apparently tense in the arms, and this appeared to impair finger dexterity.

51. This hypothesis was put forward by Gaby Casadesus whilst being interviewed for Roger Nichols’ radio broadcast ‘The Poet of the Piano’.

52. According to David Wilde.
Even Cortot's earlier recordings should not be regarded as examples of his finest technique, although some of them are excellent. It was not possible in those days to 'cut and splice' as is done today. If a mistake was made, it was time consuming and costly to re-record substantial lengths of music. This necessitated compromises. One of Cortot's recording engineers, Jean Bérand, related in an interview with Roger Nichols:

"His chosen technique was geared primarily towards expression and to the creation of extraordinary emotions through sound ... He and I didn't always use takes that were necessarily the most rigorously accurate, sometimes preferring takes which, even with slips, displayed a greater sensitivity. They corresponded more closely to his interpretation of the work in question."

It has also been suggested by Henry-Louis de La Grange that:

"... in his lucidity and pride Cortot was fully aware of any momentary technical lapse and could never bear the thought that it should be preserved in wax. He went so far as to forego listening to his studio takes and gave the recording engineer complete freedom to decide which one to keep."

This remains yet to be substantiated.

In spite of any shortcomings, Cortot's recordings remain as an important legacy for us today, although he himself never felt that they should be definitive: he was a man who constantly reconsidered his interpretations. For his time, Cortot was an extremely prolific recording artist, with more recordings to his credit than almost any other pianist, with the possible exception of Arthur Rubinstein.

53. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
54. Henry-Louis de La Grange, p. 29.
An examination of Charles Timbrell’s discography (see Appendix) shows that, in addition to Cortot’s recordings made by electric means (from approximately 1925 onwards, when electric microphones were introduced), there are also many ‘acoustic’ recordings (i.e. not recorded with electric microphones) and others for reproducing pianos. As mentioned by Henry-Louis de La Grange, Cortot recorded, or re-recorded in London almost the whole of his repertoire between 1933 and 1935. This was a very significant undertaking.\textsuperscript{56} It is important to note that, of the many recordings he made in the 1950’s and were never issued, there are 2 unedited versions of the 32 Sonatas of Beethoven, and a third version of excerpts from each Sonata, to be used for teaching purposes. Cortot was particularly renowned for his performances of Beethoven, and the availability of these recordings now for the first time (issued by Concert Artist/Fidelio Records in England) should form a significant contribution to the available body of recordings of Beethoven’s Sonatas.

Today it is through the recordings that we can experience the sensitivity of Cortot’s poetic imagination, and his total immersion in the music. Of his 1937 recording of Debussy’s \textit{Fêtes Galantes} with Dame Maggie Teyte, Cortot said:

"I would like to mention in passing a detail in the accompaniment to one of Debussy’s \textit{Fêtes Galantes} settings of Verlaine, which aroused some interest when we recorded it. With the agreement of my distinguished partner Maggie Teyte, for the song \textit{Le Faun}, I put a piece of paper between the hammers and the strings in the lower registers of the piano in order to bring out more clearly the suggestion in the poem of an imaginary drum, and so accentuating with, I hope something of Verlaine’s discretion, the characteristic-evocative outlines of the poem."\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Henry-Louis de La Grange, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{57} Recording of Cortot’s own voice, and translated version, in Roger Nichols’ radio broadcast ‘The Poet of the Piano ...’.
In many ways the recording of *Le Faun* exemplifies Cortot's contribution to the performance and interpretation of Romantic piano music. One can hear his beautiful cantabile melodies, carefully balanced tonal colours within the overall texture, unusual pedalling techniques, a refined sense of rubato within the context of both the melodic line and the characteristic rhythm of the accompaniment, all remarkably fused together as a result of his careful thought and judiciously controlled imagination.\(^{58}\)
CHAPTER TWO

The pedagogic activities of Cortot

Alfred Cortot commenced his formal teaching career in 1907 at the age of 30, when he was appointed Professor of piano in charge of the senior class for girls at the Paris Conservatoire. He remained on the piano staff of the Conservatoire until 1919, when he resigned, having founded his own school, the Ecole Normale de Musique. He continued teaching at the Ecole Normale until the late 1940's, when he retired to Lausanne. During these later years, he continued giving masterclasses in Lausanne, as well as teaching a few private students. Overall however, he taught few students privately, with the main part of his teaching comprising his lessons at the Conservatoire, and subsequently the classes and masterclasses at the Ecole Normale. Cortot held a genuine interest in teaching, and produced some of the finest concert pianists trained in France, for example: Magda Tagliaferro, Yvonne Lefèbure, Eric Heidsieck, Guthrie Luke, Gina Bachauer, Thierry de Brunhoff, Samson François, Clara Haskil, Dinu Lipatti, and also Vlado Perlemuter, the famed interpreter of Ravel’s works. Many of the people Cortot taught are still disseminating his ideas today.

Unlike many great performers, who were often forced into teaching for financial reasons, Cortot put a great deal of thought into his teaching. The thought of mediocrity in teaching filled him with disdain, and during World War Two, he established a committee to rectify what he considered to be shortcomings in the French system of music education. He was, for example, against the notion that just any unqualified amateur should be allowed to teach the piano.59 Notable members of the committee included Charles Münch and Olivier Messiaen.

Without detracting in any way from Cortot’s extensive knowledge of the music he taught, or of the associated history and culture, it is nonetheless important to mention that much of his influence as a teacher stemmed from his ability to inspire his students. According

59. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
to the English pianist Roger Nichols, Cortot taught by "inspiration, example and personality." This inspiration was three-fold, emanating from the sound of his voice, the sound of his playing, and his eloquent explanations of the music. Nichols aptly described Cortot's voice as being like that of an actor, "... ensuring that, nine times out of ten, what Cortot wanted, Cortot got." Cortot's biographer, Bernard Cavoty, wrote of Cortot's voice:

"Deep, majestic and melodious, with cello-like warmth and sudden flights which ended in cavernous murmurs, eloquence became it as well as anecdote; marvellously modulated, going effortlessly from tenderness to asperity, from merriness to apostrophe, capable of expressing the subtlest nuances, in turn coaxing or terrifying, this bass voice was as bewitching as that of any singer."

Thus the beauty of the sound of Cortot's voice, together with the poetic classical French he commanded, had its enchanting quality upon his students in the same way as the tonal colours in his piano playing enchanted his audiences.

Cortot hated pianistic virtuosity for its own sake, which he had seen perpetuated at the Conservatoire, and whilst he wished his students to possess good techniques, technique was not the main thrust of his teaching approach. He perceived the performance of music as one of the most eloquent forms of communication. A man of wide cultural, intellectual and aesthetic background, he laid great importance on the poetic description of music, of developing the mind and intellect and a knowledge of literature. The opening of the Ecole Normale de Musique in the autumn of 1919, under his direction, was a significant event for Cortot, as it became the vehicle for the realisation of his aims.

61. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.
The École Normale was more diverse in approach than the Conservatoire, indulging itself less with the kind of mindless virtuosity which Cortot despised. There were not the same stringent entrance examinations as in the Conservatoire and there were no age limits imposed on applicants. In this way, it was possible for students over the age of 18 to pursue their studies and develop their skills. The school accepted not only potential professional soloists, but also potential professional teachers, the training of whom Cortot regarded as a mission. In fact, there was a high level of pianism achieved even by those who were not in the concert performance stream. Clearly then, Cortot held the educational aim to "broaden the mind as well as the fingers."

Like the Conservatoire, the École Normale enrolled students other than pianists, although it was with the piano students that Cortot had most direct contact, and therefore most influence. Over the years, Cortot conducted some of the piano classes in the École Normale, whilst his assistants conducted others, particularly during the periods when he was absent on concert tours. There were separate classes on technique, and on general interpretation, but even in the latter, the students were expected to perform a new étude every week. In the technique classes, the students worked through Cortot's own technique book *Principes Rationnels de la Technique Pianistique*. In addition to these classes on technique and general interpretation, there were also public masterclasses conducted at the École Normale by Cortot and his colleagues. The public masterclasses became famous, and had great influence on music making of the day.

The place of piano technique in Cortot's teaching needs some further explanation, since the accounts of those who studied piano at the École Normale can be confusing, unless placed within a wider context. As previously mentioned, Cortot himself had always had to

63. According to Max Cooke.

64. Roger Nichols, 'The Poet of the Piano ...'.

65. According to Max Cooke, who studied in the class taken by Madame Blanche Bascouret de Guéraldi, one of Cortot's assistants.
practise diligently in order to compensate for his weak hand and small span, this being reflected in the fact that he practised for four hours every morning, at least until 1939. His own teaching in lessons and masterclasses was not based around technique however, unlike that of his assistants, and unlike his own publications, which do show a great emphasis on technique. It has been said by many who attended his classes, that he spoke very little of technique or practice methods in those classes. The researcher Roger Nichols hypothesised:

"His written pedagogical works were a kind of smokescreen, and a profitable one. He knew that the essence of his teaching could not be conveyed in technical terms and I suspect his writings were published ... to promote his image as 'the great teacher'."\(^\text{66}\)

This is only part of the truth, however. In fact, Cortot's publications display an extensive consideration of technique, and the courses over which he presided at the Ecole Normale ensured that all piano students underwent a thorough technical training in the classes conducted by his assistants. It would be more accurate to say that he preferred to involve himself more with the interpretive side of the art, considering technique as a means to an end, that is, the means of elucidating the sublime beauty of the music. This is illustrated in his written comments on Chopin's Revolutionary Etude, Op. 10, No. 12:

"Nevertheless, the throbbing, the sweep and marked vigour which run through its pages will only be truthfully rendered by the performer who has overcome the difficulties and who can completely ignore the numerous technical obstacles which lie between him and the feelings he must express."\(^\text{67}\)


Despite Cortot’s own stated preference for the artistic rather than technical side of piano playing, there are some significant contributions that he made in the area of technique. He was one of few teachers of the time to advocate the breaking down of technical problems into their component parts, realising for example, that mere repetition, as opposed to analytical practice, was more likely to reinforce a technical problem than eradicate it. In the preface to his Student’s Editions of 1914 of both books of Chopin’s études, Cortot wrote:

"Study, not only the difficult passage but the difficulty itself reduced to its most elementary principles ... This principle will hold good for all pianoforte practising; it does away with mechanical work which degrades the study of an Art essentially featured by sensibility and elegance ..." 68

This analytical approach to technique was therefore a positive result of the paramount importance Cortot placed on artistic matters. The breaking down of technical problems into their components can be seen for example in Cortot’s treatment of Chopin’s Étude in A minor, Op. 10, No. 2, where he wrote of the "... divided muscular action of the hand into two elements, one playing the predominant part, the other merely the accompaniment." 69 He subsequently provided a detail of exercises aimed at achieving the required independent part-playing.

Other analyses in the Student’s Editions suggest transposing the Étude into a key just one semitone away from the original, retaining the same fingerings. Most traditional technical methods of the day preferred to avoid the use of thumbs on the black keys.

68. Ibidem, title page, p. 6. also.
In his publication *Principes Rationnels de la Technique Pianistique*, Cortot's technical aims were the same as those of traditional methods, whilst the means to achieve these aims were quite different. He systematically reduced the various technical difficulties to their smallest elements, progressing through all the keys. Although there are some drawbacks to the book, in so far as there are excessive demands and numbers of exercises, it provides still for us today, a valid and thorough study of piano technique. A cursory overview of the contents of the chapters of this book, which first appeared in 1928, will serve to illustrate Cortot's systematic treatment of technique:

Chapter 1  Evenness, independence and mobility of the fingers.
Chapter 3  The technique of double notes and polyphonic playing.
Chapter 4  The technique of extensions.
Chapter 5  The technique of the wrist. The execution of chords.

An extensive repertoire table is provided at the end of the book, in order that teachers may select for their students, pieces according to the level of difficulty. Through his assistants, Cortot's technical method has since formed the basis of the technical training of a number of fine French concert pianists of today. For example, Eric Heidsieck, Thierry de Brunhoff, Anne Quéffelec and Pascal Devoyon were all taught by Blanche Bascouret de Guéraldi (one of Cortot's favourite assistants), some of them also having had lessons from Cortot himself.

Another way in which Cortot provided a step forward in the area of technical training was the inclusion of a number of exercises in his Student's Editions. These exercises were to be practised within the context of a particular piece, that is, with a view to the performance. They were not divorced from the music as in the technical methods of Hanon and Joseffy for example, although this was perforce the case in his own *Principes Rationnels de la Technique Pianistique*. 
Cortot always encouraged his students to explore artistic and musical imagination, and to this end, his Student's Editions (Editions de Travail), contain many poetic descriptions of the music. These descriptions embodied the character he felt to be contained in the music. He prepared some 80 volumes of the editions, covering much of the important solo piano music of composers of the Romantic era: Chopin, Schumann, Schubert, Liszt, Mendelssohn and Weber.

This kind of poetic insight was also encouraged by Cortot in the masterclasses he gave. David Barnett wrote:

"Before beginning the study of a new composition, Cortot insisted that the student prepare a detailed commentary on its origin, replete with facts, dates, relevant biography, and quotations from the letters of the composer and his contemporaries. He also required of the student a description of the music, full of imagery and poetic insights and recording the effect it had on his own sensibility."

The students were also expected to discuss the technical problems they had encountered, and the way in which they had solved them.

The masterclasses Cortot presented formed an important part of his teaching, as it was through them that he demonstrated a great many of his teaching ideals. Before elaborating however, it will be helpful to place Cortot's masterclasses in their historical context. From 1921 onwards, Cortot held public masterclasses in May and June of each year at the Ecole Normale. Although his colleagues Thibaud, Georges Enesco, Casals and Marcel Dupré also gave masterclasses, it was those given by Cortot which became the most famous and attracted the most students, many of whom came from other continents. Apart from these public masterclasses at the Ecole Normale, Cortot gave public masterclasses in the Lausanne Conservatoire (presumably after

71. According to Max Cooke.
1947 when he retired to Switzerland), in Siena for a number of summers, in addition to special private masterclasses for his students. The influence of the masterclasses at the Ecole Normale was far-reaching, drawing not only many students from the USA and elsewhere, but many of the piano teachers from Paris itself. Jeanne Thieffry recorded much of what Cortot expounded in masterclasses in her book *Cours d’Interprétation*, which is still regarded as an important publication for anyone studying the piano repertoire.\textsuperscript{72} It is through this book that we experience some of the fine literary and cultural background which Cortot possessed.

In encouraging the students of his masterclasses to artistic imagination, Cortot used a three-fold approach with his students: i) encouraging them to conjure up an image of what they wanted to project to the listener; ii) requiring formal analyses of the music being studied, thereby ensuring that the students had an understanding of the musical style and structures; and iii) an abandonment of self, that is, the total immersion into the music, so that the performer truly becomes a servant of the music.\textsuperscript{73} Cortot always advised his students to modify the mood and tonal balance during recapitulatory sections, so that the same passage was not played the same way twice. Thus the mind of the performer was obliged to be fully engaged.

Cortot viewed the performer’s task in two parts: firstly, the preliminary work, the formative and the technical, which he considered to be like the manual work of a labourer; secondly, the actual performance. He is known to have said that, once the preliminary work was completed, the pianist should smoke a cigarette, walk around the room, forget about the technical details, and in this way, he could then become transformed into an artist ready to perform.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} Paris: Legouix, 1934.

\textsuperscript{73} Roger Nichols, ‘Alfred Cortot, 1877-1962’, p. 762.

\textsuperscript{74} According to Max Cooke.
Parallel to this dichotomy of the performer’s task, Cortot personified the concept of strictness versus freedom, especially in terms of rhythm. His former student, Eric Heidsieck, said:

"This was one of his key precepts - the need for the player to attain rhythmic flexibility of the small metric units while maintaining the larger units quite strictly. For example, if you are playing in four-four time with frequent sixteenth notes, you keep the four beats even and regular while the sixteenth notes are freer in relation to each other, melodically expressive even if fast. What he asked for, always, was balance between sobriety and fantasy."

This ambivalence of rhythmic interpretation was earlier to be found in Chopin’s playing. In Cortot’s teaching, discipline came foremost: he insisted on rhythmic unity first before any rubato might be considered. In his playing he gave the impression of free improvisation and flexibility, but this was always based upon strict discipline and the most thorough and careful preparation. In other words, Cortot imposed a limit or discipline on free-ranging Romanticism. It was this to which Alfred Brendel referred when he described Cortot’s interpretive characteristics as "control ... in the guise of improvisation."

Whatever his political leanings in World War Two (the controversy over whether he was a ‘collaborateur’ with the Nazis), it seems that Cortot held a genuine belief in the positive effect of the unification of the French and German cultures. To this end, he concentrated on the German piano repertoire in his teaching and playing (particularly Schumann’s piano works) to a far greater extent.

75. Charles Timbrell, 'Alfred Cortot ...', p. 28.

than any other piano teacher in France before him. It is significant for example, that he held masterclasses on the 32 Sonatas of Beethoven in Lausanne in 1949, and again in Paris in 1950. Further masterclasses in 1951 at the Ecole Normale centred on the piano works of Schumann. As late as 1966, Cortot was still giving masterclasses, this time a series of 10, at the Lausanne Conservatoire, on the works of Chopin and Schumann. That Cortot planned such large-scale cycles of masterclasses, treating Romantic piano works in great detail, at a time when few teachers were doing this, is an expression of both the respect he held for the music, and his interest in encouraging students to a similar degree of enthusiasm.

Cortot saw a pedagogical role in his own performances and recordings for the general public as well. Already in 1924, he was planning cycles of concerts with a common theme, specifically 10 solo recitals based around the works of the masters of the nineteenth century, which he presented at the Paris Conservatoire. The first of these programmes comprised the Sonatas Op. 27, No. 2; Op. 57; Op. 81a; and the 32 Variations in C minor by Beethoven. Such a programme represented a relatively serious academic approach, in an era when most of the programmes of the 'great' artists were more likely to include at least a few showy, virtuosic 'tit-bits.' As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cortot recorded in the 1950's, not only two complete versions of all 32 Sonatas by Beethoven, but also a third version of excerpts from each Sonata for teaching purposes.

Alfred Cortot's contribution as a pedagogue stems from a synthesis of many of his activities. Apart from the musical knowledge and insight he imparted in the actual lessons and masterclasses he gave, it was the founding of the Ecole Normale which has had great influence on the French music education system and piano playing in general to this day. The liberal aims of the Ecole Normale shifted the emphasis away from the merely virtuosic playing predominating at the Paris Conservatoire to a style which considered the poetic qualities of the music to a much greater extent. Through the masterclasses and the Student's Editions, he inspired his students to

77. According to Max Cooke.
artistic and musical imagination, but at the same time, he encouraged a high level of technical competence and a thorough knowledge of the historical and social background of the music. The technical competence was dealt with in his book Principes Rationnels..., and taught by his assistants at the Ecole Normale. The social and historical background was covered not only in courses at the Ecole Normale over which Cortot presided, but also within the context of his own lessons and classes. The masterclasses provided an exciting new forum for critical awareness in piano playing for pianists from many countries around the world. Many of these pianists are still passing on the inspiration and knowledge which they gained from Cortot's masterclasses and publications to their own students today. In educating the French public to the desirability of the unification of the French and German cultures, he presented many piano works in masterclasses and recitals which the French would have rarely heard otherwise. Due to his refined cosmopolitan tastes, Cortot was able to transcend the traditional boundaries between teacher, performer, technician and historian, thereby educating his followers into a complete artistic experience, as opposed to teaching them mere digital piano skills. This was consistent with his own total immersion of self in the music, which he saw as the Romantic ideal.
CHAPTER THREE

Cortot as researcher: his collecting, editing, writing and study of source materials

That Cortot made a significant impact as a performer and teacher was the result of his wide knowledge and intellectualism, which in turn stemmed largely from his meticulous and exhaustive research activities. The wide background provided by these activities enabled Cortot to write various books and articles on the composers and their music, as well as his famous Editions de Travail, or Student’s Editions, which are still used widely today. In his collecting activities Cortot acquired sacred vocal music, much printed music, treatises, books and periodicals about music, letters of composers, important first editions of music, and composers’ autograph manuscripts. It is significant for example, that in the latter category, Cortot procured the manuscripts of Liszt’s B minor Sonata, the first book of Debussy’s Préludes, and the D minor concerto of Brahms. Such privileged ownership doubtlessly contributed to the great insight Cortot exhibited as a performer and teacher of such works. His private library eventually grew so large that it was officially catalogued. After his death in 1962, his collection was sold, and today it lies dispersed predominantly between four institutions: the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the British Museum in London, the Newberry Library in Chicago, and the University of California, Berkeley.

Although extensive detail concerning Cortot’s research activities and his library can be found in the articles ‘Alfred Cortot as Collector of Music’ by Albi Rosenthal and ‘Dispersal of the Cortot Collection: 290 Treatises in Lexington’ by Frank Traficante, it will nonetheless be helpful to summarise here some of the more important points of both these articles.78


It was Cortot's friend Henry Prunières (1886-1942), a noted French musicologist, who inspired Cortot to begin researching and collecting, and provided him with a system of catalogue classification. A brief consideration of the categories of Cortot's catalogue will indicate his thorough attention to detail and strict methodical approach, qualities which were borne out also in his playing and teaching. The categories were as follows:

Théorie musicale (TM)
Esthétique musicale (EM) (including a special section on the 'Querelle des Bouffons' controversy)
Histoire de musique (HM)
Méthodes (MET)
Histoire des instruments (HI)
Bibliographie musicale (BIB)
Dictionnaires de musique (DIC)
Catalogues (CAT) Subsections: Auteurs, (Catalgs. thématiques), Bibliothèques, Expositions, Editeurs, Libraires, Ventes.
Périodiques musicaux (PM)
Biographie musicale (BM)
Mémoires et correspondances (MC)
Ouvrages relatifs à la musique (ORM)
Notation musicale (NOM)
Musique instrumentale antérieure à 1800 (MIA)
Musique vocale religieuse (MVR)
Liturgie (LIT)
Musique vocale profane (MVP)
Folklore (FOL)
Musique dramatique (MD)
Danse-chorégraphie (D)

Interprétation (INT)
Facsimilés (FACS)
Iconographie (ICON)
MSS autographes
Lettres autographes
Musique instrumentale postérieure à 1800
Premières éditions de Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt, Chopin, &c.
Partitions d'orchestre
Matériel d'orchestre
Partitions de Poche
Éditions de travail.  

In addition, Cortot augmented his collection with musicians' portraits, coins and medals, as well as postage stamps with musical associations. Whenever he had time on any of his tours, he would visit the local antique and book shops. In many such shops the proprietors would keep aside items for him, as a special customer. In the auctions of firms such as Leo Liepman'ssohn, Henrici, Stargardt, Karl and Faber, Hoepli, Sotheby, and Christie, he was represented by local dealers who purchased items on his behalf.

In 1936, Cortot's library had grown so large, that it led to the publication of a catalogue of theoretical treatises under the auspices of the International Musicological Society. Following Cortot's death (1962), the major part of his collection was acquired by Otto Hass, a London antiquarian with whom Cortot had often had dealings. Various other institutions subsequently purchased portions of the collection from Hass.

The British Museum purchase comprised 62 items of printed music, dating from 1532 to around 1780. The University of California (Berkeley) bought a large number of full scores; a few vocal scores; 300 libretti of French operas (mostly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries); a few scores of Italian, English and German operas; printed music (including many first editions); manuscripts; 40 sixteenth century part books and other scores and manuscripts.

The Newberry Library in Chicago acquired music, treatises and a Bouffons collection. Most of the music in this collection is sacred. Treatises comprise a significant portion of this purchase, with nine of them in manuscript form. There are nearly 395 single items in total. In 1966, the University of Kentucky, Lexington, purchased the remainder of the treatises not acquired by the Newberry Library. There were 30 from the sixteenth century, 53 from the seventeenth, 201 from the eighteenth, and 4 from the first 2 decades of the nineteenth century. Frank Traficante wrote:

"A comparison of the number of treatises now at Newberry and the University of Kentucky with those listed in the Cortot catalogue of 1936, leaves over 200 - almost a fourth of the total - unaccounted for."  

The autograph manuscripts which Cortot had possessed were bought by Mr. Robert O. Lehman in 1962, many of them having been deposited subsequently in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York. A large number of the autograph letters were purchased by the Comtesse de Chambure.

The importance of Cortot's collection was summed up by Albi Rosenthal as follows:

"For Cortot, collecting was a quest for a documentary 'Gesamtkunstwerk', in which every aspect of music had its legitimate place ... Both the music of the great masters of the past and that of the contemporaries he pioneered was always seen by him in the context of tradition, of which his library was a visible expression."  

Clearly then, Cortot possessed an enormous amount of information upon which he based his own writings and upon which he could draw for his own pianistic interpretations and teaching activities. His 3 volumes of La Musique Francaise de Piano, of which the first 2 have

80. Frank Traficante, p. 716.
81. Albi Rosenthal, p. 211.
been translated into English, first appeared between 1930 and 1932. Many of the chapters were based upon articles which Cortot originally wrote for La Revue Musicale in the 1920's. Together the 3 volumes of La Musique Française de Piano form an important work, still considered by pianists and piano teachers as a standard classic on French piano music. In Cortot's own preface, he stated that here he concerned himself with the artistic and poetic qualities:

"These studies are, first and foremost, the notes of a pianist wishing to share his impressions, and to create in the listener a state of mental receptivity similar to his own. They aim not so much at a rigid musical analysis or discussion of the aesthetic question as at the expression of the poetical quality of the works concerned.

My purpose will be amply achieved if the reading of these commentaries stimulates some lovers of piano music to share my admiration for the wide variety of profound, lyrical, or picturesque compositions in which the creative genius of the musicians of our race has revealed itself, and which, as a whole, reflects one of the supreme moments in the musical history of France." 82

A listing of the contents of these 3 volumes shows the comprehensive nature of Cortot's study:

Vol. 1
The Piano Music of Claude Debussy
The Piano Music of César Franck
The Piano Music of Gabriel Fauré
The Piano Music of Emmanuel Chabrier
The Piano Music of Paul Dukas

Vol. 2
The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel
Saint-Saëns and the Piano
The Pianistic Work of Vincent d'Indy
The Work for Piano by Florent Schmitt
Décodat de Séverac and his Pianistic Work
The Six Sonatinas for Piano by M. Emmanuel

Vol. 3
"Les Six" and the Piano
The Pianistic Work of Albert Roussel
Igor Stravinsky, the Piano and the Pianists
The case of Erik Satie

In the margin of two contemporary pianistic works: Variations, by Gabriel Pierné and Le Chant de la Mer, by Gustave Samazeuilh.

Not only was Cortot known as a great interpreter of Chopin, but he also conducted a great deal of research into Chopin's life and music, eventually writing a book: Aspects de Chopin (Paris: Albin Michel, 1949). An English translation, In Search of Chopin, appeared 2 years later, in 1951 (London: Peter Nevill). In this book, Cortot presented not only a comprehensive account of Chopin's life and activities, but also an interesting transcription of a hitherto unpublished manuscript concerning Chopin's notes for a piano 'method.' Jeanne Holland reported:

"In 1936, Alfred Cortot acquired the manuscript containing Chopin's notes for a piano method. After examining the original manuscript, Cortot decided that Natalie Janotha had not reproduced the text exactly, and that Chopin's notes, far from being a declaration of artistic faith, were nothing but a prospectus for an elementary piano book whose sole purpose was to bring the author financial gain. Far from being impressed with the manuscript, Cortot regretted that it had escaped the bonfire that consumed Chopin's other unfinished works."

Although Cortot may have expressed some misgivings, he was nevertheless responsible for bringing the document to light, providing a full transcription of it in order that the reader could form his or her opinion. 84

In connection with this, it is also important to mention that, although Cortot was sometimes criticised for artistic licence in his playing, his hints for performance in his publications and lessons were always based upon a detailed knowledge of the original sources, and any divergence for artistic reasons was generally acknowledged as such. For example, in his solo piano arrangement of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor for organ, Cortot altered the final cadence from D minor to D major, and even added an extra bar, believing this to give greater resonance, in the manner of the organ. The original cadence was preserved in the main body of the music, whilst Cortot’s version was contained in a footnote, thereby acknowledging the original. 85 In many of the personalised editions of other famous artists of the era, such acknowledgements were rare.


La somptueuse plénitude du timbre de l'orgue assure à cette mesure de conclusion en ré mineur une puissance et un rayonnement sonores auxquels ne peuvent prétendre les ressources du piano. On ne croit pas trahir l'intention de Bach en accordant à l'interprète de cette transcription, la possibilité de parfaire avec plus d'intensité la signification majestueuse des derniers accords de la coda, en les orientant vers la tonalité de ré majeur au moyen de la redaction ci-après.

Die prächtige Fülle der Orgelklänge sichert diesem Schlußakt in d-moll eine Stärke und eine Ausdehnung in der Tonwirkung, welche das Klavier mit seinen Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten nicht zu erreichen vermag. Es scheint uns also kein Verrat an Bach zu sein, wenn dem Ausführenden in dieser Bearbeitung die Möglichkeit geboten wird, die majestätische Bedeutung der Schlufsbäder der Coda dadurch noch wirkungsvoller zu gestalten, daß sie mittels der folgenden Übertragung in die D-dur-Tonart geleitet werden:

La soñuosa plenitudine del timbro del organo da a questa battuta di conclusione in re minore una potenza e una irradiazione sonora quali non possono pretendere le risorse del pianoforte. Non si crede tradire l'intenzione di Bach permettendo all'interprete di questa transizione la possibilità di ultimare con più d'intensità la significazione maestosa degli accordi finali della coda, orientandoli verso la tonalità di re maggiore nel modo redatto qui presso:

The sumptuous plenitude of the organ sound gives to this concluding bar in D minor a sonorous power and radiation to which the resources of the piano cannot pretend.

We believe that we do not betray Bach's intention in granting to the interpreter of this translation the possibility of rendering with a greater intensity the majestic significance of the last chords of the Coda by orienting them towards the tonality of D major, by means of the following arrangement:

Ex.11: J.S. Bach: Toccata e Fuga pour Orgue (en ré mineur) (ed. Cortot).

Thus, Cortot coupled a respect for the composer's original intention and a knowledge of the sources with his own artistic imagination. He thus pointed the way toward modern musical scholarship, preferring to base his interpretive ideas on disciplined research rather than egocentric attitudes and ignorance of the sources, as was not uncommon amongst performers of the time. His knowledge of baroque music for example, led him to remark on the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue by Bach:
"It is regrettable that one often plays, quite wrongly, in an organ style, pieces written for the harpsichord and the salon. This is how it is regarding the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue. The Suites for solo cello were also distorted until Casals restored the confidential character, which belongs to them. Works such as the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue (through proportion and dramatic character, obviously very different from the pieces in the Well-tempered Clavier) are often played with too much ostentation, because one tries to perform them in the style of organ music." 86

Coming from Jeanne Thieffry's written transcription of Cortot's masterclasses, this indicates that Cortot was concerned with style and wished to impart his ideas to his students.

Cortot prepared about 80 volumes of his Editions de Travail, or Student's Editions, covering a great deal of important piano literature of the Romantic era. A photostatic reproduction of the back cover of one of these editions demonstrates at a glance the huge volume of music Cortot prepared for piano students, much of this work having been undertaken in his later years in Lausanne (see page 46a). Of the importance of Cortot's Student's Editions, John Philips wrote:

"These editions reflect an impressive degree of research into autograph manuscripts, first editions, and published copies of works annotated for study purposes by their composers. Transcending by far the usual suggestions of fingerings, pedalings [sic], and tempos, Cortot's study editions usually include historical background for the work incorporating both factual material and traditional anecdote, suggestions for interpretation based upon theoretical..."

Editions de Travail par ALFRED COTOT

Édition commentée des Chef-d’Œuvre des Maîtres Romantiques du Piano
avec analyses détaillées des œuvres et conseils d'interprétation et de technique

Chopin

BALLADES
12 ÉTUDES Op. 10
15 ÉTUDES Op. 25
IMPROVISATION
MAZURIKAS (3 volumes)
NOCTURNES (2 volumes)
PIÈCES DIVERSES
POLONAISES
RONDOs Op. 1, 6 et 16
SCHERZOS
SONATE Op. 15
SONATE Op. 28
VARIATIONS

PIÈCES DIVERSES (3e série)
Fantaisie Op. 49
Marche Funèbre Op. 56
Nocturne Op. 62
Sonate Op. 48
Variations sur une Marche allemande

Schumann

Op. 1 VARIATIONS SUR LE NOM ABEGG
Op. 2 PAPILLONS
Op. 3 DAVIDSBUHLER TANZE (Danses des compagnons de David)
Op. 7 TOCCATA
Op. 9 CAHNAVAI
Op. 11 3ème SONATE (Dansée mineure)
Op. 12 FANTAISIESTUCKE (Morceaux de fantaisie)
Op. 13 ETUDES SYMPHONIQUES EN FORME DE VARIATIONS
Op. 14 5ème SONATE (Concert sans orchestre)
Op. 15 SCENES D’ENFANTS
Op. 16 KREISLICHINA
Op. 17 FANTAISIE
Op. 18 ARABESQUE
Op. 19 BLUMENSTUCKE
Op. 20 HUMORESQUE
Op. 21 NOVELLETTES
Op. 22 2ème SONATE (Son mineur)
Op. 25 CAHNAVAI, DE VIENNE
Op. 89 SCENES DE LA FORET

Liszt

APRÈS UNE LECTURE DU DANTE (Fantaisie quasi Sonate)
AU HÔPITAL D’UNE SOURCE

BANDONI
BENEDICITION DE DIEU DANS LA SOLITUDE
3 CAPRICEs : I) lamento - II) La Leggieressa - III) Un Sorcière
CONNESSIONS
5 ÉTUDES D’APRÈS PAGANINI
ETUDES D’EXÉCUTION TRANSCENDANTE
9 ÉTUDES ET PIÈCES DE CONCERT :
1) Waldesruachen (Bouleversements de la Forêt)

BACH, J. F. (Ronde des Lutins)
FAUSTIANE ET FUGUE SUR LE NOM DE BACH
FAUSTIANE SUR DON JUAN
FENNEBELLES
LES JEUX D’EAU A LA VILLA D’ESTE

LEGENDE No. 1 : St-François d’Assise (Prédication aux oiseaux)
LEGENDE No. 2 : St-François d’Assise marchant sur les flots
MÉPHISTO-WALZER

POLONAISE
RAPSOIDE ESPAGNOLE
RAPSODIES HONGROISES no 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
REVES D’AMOUR (Lechertons) : Trois Nocturnes
SONATE EN SI MINEUR
VARIATIONS SUR LE THÈME DE HACH : Weinen, Klagen

VENEZIA ET NAPOLI

Mendelssohn

CAPRICCIO EN FA DIÈZE MINEUR, Op. 5
RONDINO CAPRICESSO, Op. 14
SCHERZO EN MI MINEUR (No II des Trois Caprices Op. 16)
PRESTO FINALE DE LA FANTAISIE Op. 48
PRELUDE ET FUGUE EN MI MINEUR Op. 55 n° 1
VARIATIONS SERIEUSES Op. 24
VARIATIONS Op. 85
ETUDE EN FA MAJEUR Op. 104 n° 1
ROMANCES SANS PAROLES Sélection comprenant les no 10

I. Deux Souvenirs, Op. 19 n° 1
II. La Chasse, Op. 19 n° 3
III. La Chasse, Op. 19 n° 3
XXXII. Tristesse de l’âne, Op. 55 n° 4
XXXVII. Marche funèbre, Op. 67 n° 3
XXX. Chanson du Printemps, Op. 67 n° 6
XXXIV. La Fileuse, Op. 67 n° 4
XXXVI. Sérénade, Op. 67 n° 6

Weber

DEUXIÈME GRANDE SONATE EN LA b majeur Op. 5
INVITATION À LA VALSE Aufforderung zum Tanz Op. 6
RONDINO BRILLANT Op. 6a
MOMENTO CAPRICCOSSO Op. 22
POLONAISE BRILLANTE Op. 7a

Schubert

FANTAISIE EN UT MAJEUR (Wanderer-Fantasie) Op. 16
MOMENT MUSICAL Op. 94 n° 5
DOUZE LANDLER Op. 171
DEUX IMPROMPTUS Op. 90 n° 2 et 4
DEUX IMPROMPTUS Op. 142 n° 2 et 4

Introduction à la Méthode ALFRED COTOT

Jeanne Blancard

PRINCIPES ÉLÉMENTAIRES de la TECHNIQUE PIANISTIQUE

AUX ÉDITIONS SALABERT, 22, rue Chaubert, PARIS - IX
aspects as well as its expressive indications, and exercises aimed at mastery of particular technical difficulties. Such a comprehensive approach to the editing task reflects great concern for both the composer's intentions and the pianist's problems."

It was significant that Cortot provided in these editions, technical exercises in association with the performance of a piece. This enabled the student to apply technique directly to the music, rather than considering it as something quite separate. Notwithstanding these admirable qualities, however, including the hints on technique, pedalling, tempo, fingerings, dynamics and historical background, it was actually Cortot's wonderfully poetic way of describing the music which was of greatest import. In his view, it was the inherent subliminal quality in the music which necessitated all the other features, so that the mechanics of piano playing were a means to an end, and not an end in themselves (as he had felt to be the case in the Paris Conservatoire). According to Charles Timbrell, Cortot's editions also had influence on those of Carlo Zecchi (in his editions of Schumann's works) and Guido Agosti (Agosti and Cortot taught together in Siena over a number of summers). The Student's Editions continue to be used widely today by both teachers and students of the piano.

That Cortot was able to compile a book on piano technique, Principes Rationnels de la Technique Pianistique, within his role as a pedagogue at the Ecole Normale, was the result of his efforts as a researcher and innovator. He deviated from traditional technical approaches precisely because they could not produce the special cantabile sound that he wanted, and for which he was so famous as a performer. His inquiring mind led him then to invent a new system of

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88. Charles Timbrell, letter to the author.
technical exercises, where he reduced various technical difficulties to their smallest elements, working through all the keys with the aim of acquiring both pianistic and tonal command. Although we may today consider that there are excessive demands and an unduly large number of exercises in the book, it is nonetheless an extremely important and useful collection of exercises upon which the pianist can draw according to personal needs.

The other category of Cortot's publications which has not yet been considered, comprises his arrangements for solo piano, of works originally composed for other media. Along with other works, he arranged the following for solo piano: Brahms' Lullaby, Heiden-Röslein by Schubert, the Largo from Chopin's Cello Sonata, and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor for organ and the Largo movement from the Brandenburg Concerto in F minor by Bach. Not only did some of these become Cortot's celebrated encores, but they stand today as a body of tastefully and successfully transcribed works. The compositional and musical integrity of the original versions have been preserved in the arrangements, and yet one has the impression that they are idiomatic solo piano pieces.

The contents of this chapter portray a person who was not only a pianist, not only a musician, but was a widely cultured human being steeped in the arts as a whole. His passion for collecting materials connected with music was associated with his search for artistic truth and his quest for "a documentary 'Gesamtkunstwerk'."\(^9\) That the topics of his publications included a range of subjects, such as biography, interpretation of music and technical methods, is testimony to the breadth of his intellect. That, in the midst of a busy life as concert pianist, he was able to find time for careful editing and study of original manuscripts as well as analysis of technical matters, indicates the integrity with which he approached all of his work.

89. Albi Rosenthal, p. 211.
Conclusion

The notion that freedom must be accompanied by responsibility is a known condition of life, which Cortot appears to have lived by. In Brendel's words, the responsibility, or discipline, led in his playing to "control ... in the guise of improvisation."\(^9\) In this way, the free-ranging features common in Romanticism were disciplined or limited.

Cortot's performances embodied the Romantic spirit, and his contribution helped to keep it alive well into the twentieth century. Whilst he conveyed a very personal and individual image, this being part of the Romantic idéal, he also embraced an international outlook, another feature of Romanticism. It was doubtless this which led to his belief in the merging of the French and German cultures. It may have been the reason for his 'collaboration' with the Nazi invaders during the war, and thus, the unfortunate circumstances which followed.

He was undoubtedly the 'Poet of the Piano', introducing to that instrument the concept of a vocal line and orchestral colours. One may be able to point to some technical weaknesses, which could have been due to his concentration on the fingers and hand, with less specific understanding of the role of the arm, or indeed of the body as a whole.\(^9\) The technical weaknesses in his later performances, together with changes away from Romantic interpretive traditions, made by many modern pianists, may have led some to misjudge him, and fail to recognise his many outstanding qualities.

That which remains most strongly in the memory of those who heard him perform is undoubtedly more powerful in its effect than anything that can be had now from his recordings, and yet for students of his performance style, there is much that does remain.

90. Alfred Brendel, p. 125.

91. According to Max Cooke.
The beauty of his sound and the range of his orchestral colours are only there in part, and must be imagined. For those accustomed solely to modern recordings and reproduction techniques, the shortcomings of his recordings must be disturbing. Yet pianists, music lovers and teachers, do still gain much from the experience of hearing his recorded legacy, and today there appears to be a return to the more personal imaginative approach to music, that was his.

In the field of teaching, the situation is similar, although here perhaps, more has been lost. It is certain that the effectiveness of his teaching depended to a large extent on his charisma, on his ability to express himself splendidly in words, and on his piano demonstrations before students. Nevertheless, the effects of Cortot as a teacher continue on in several ways. Firstly, there are the philosophies which lay behind the establishment of the Ecole Normale de Musique, and of course, there are his writings and his publications about music and technique. Most of all, however, his teachings continue to be expounded by those who studied with him at the Ecole Normale and elsewhere, and the following generation, which has continued to pass on his ideals and principles.

In so far as his publications are still available and extensively used, Cortot's influence as a researcher and editor can be seen more obviously to persist. Although musicological studies and standards of music editing have developed steadily during the past 50 years, Cortot can be seen as one of the pioneers of this development, and the integrity of his work was such that his publications are still recognised to be of great value.

It seems certain that Cortot's influence will last as long as his recordings exist, as long as his publications are still available, and as long as his teachings are kept alive by those who pass on his ideas. This may be for some time yet.
Appendix

Discography

Sound recordings of Alfred Cortot. A catalogue compiled by Dr. Charles Timbrell (reproduced by permission).

Cortot was a prolific recording artist for his day. He recorded much of the important solo repertoire of the Romantic era, as well as several concertos and important chamber works. The large number of recordings can be confusing for us today to interpret, thus it will be helpful to give a brief background, before presenting Dr. Timbrell’s discography.

As mentioned by Dr. Timbrell, Cortot made a number of piano rolls for reproducing pianos, specifically for the Duo-art and Ampico companies. These appear to have been made before 1920.

The first 78’s which Cortot made were recorded by acoustic means, that is, without electric microphones, using instead the old-fashioned megaphone-type of microphone, whereby the vibrations of the sound source alone caused the cutting needle to vibrate. Mostly, these recordings were made with HMV/EMI, although file entries concerning them are scarce.

In 1925, the electric microphone began to be used in the commercial recording process, and it appears that Cortot signed his first contract with EMI on 1 December 1926 (this is the first mention of a contract in the EMI ledgers). There are some interesting observations which come to light from an examination of the ledgers and recording advice sheets of EMI. Firstly, Cortot nearly always signed two-year contracts, but frequently renewed them at the end of the first year, for a further two-year period. Perhaps this was due to a shrewd business sense, that he wanted to ensure that he was continually contracted. Secondly, the last pre-war contract expired on 28 February 1939, and there were no more contracts undertaken between Cortot and EMI until he again signed for two years from 1 January 1947. Obviously, France was occupied by the Germans for some of the intervening period, but this does not fully explain why
he ceased recording in London before the war even began. His last contract with EMI expired in 1955. Thirdly, there were many recording sessions, particularly in the later years, in which the 'takes' did not reach the stage of being made into a 'master' (presumably because they were 'artistically unsatisfactory'), and others which were made into 'masters' yet not issued to the public (for example, the recordings of Beethoven's Sonatas which were made in the 1950's). Many of these 'takes' and 'masters' are still in the EMI archives, and some of these recordings have now been issued recently for the first time.

The task of cataloguing Cortot's recordings has been made difficult by the fact that he recorded many pieces several times each, for instance, Chopin's Tarantella, of which his first recording was acoustic (pre-1925), whilst the fourth and final version dates from 1953. There have also been many re-issues of many of his recordings, brought out by both EMI and other record companies.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Charles Timbrell, Assistant Professor of piano at Howard University, for his kind permission to reproduce his article 'A Cortot Discography' (The Piano Quarterly, No. 127, Fall 1984, pp.29-31). In updating his discography, he supplied the following addenda:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>HMV/EMI</th>
<th>Currently Available</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chopin:</td>
<td>Ballade No.1 (2nd half)</td>
<td>ac</td>
<td></td>
<td>JapVMI-7315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopin:</td>
<td>Etude, Op. 25, No. 11</td>
<td>ac</td>
<td></td>
<td>JapVMI-7315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopin:</td>
<td>Impromptus, Nos. 1 and 2</td>
<td>ac</td>
<td></td>
<td>JapVMI-7315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liszt</td>
<td>Hungarian Rhapsody No. 11 (2) (3)</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>DB 21618</td>
<td>Arabesque 8011 Jap.Vic SD 3104</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saint-Saëns:</td>
<td>Etude en forme de Valse (2) (3)</td>
<td>DB 167</td>
<td>DB 1535</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schumann:</td>
<td>Kinderszenen</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td></td>
<td>Italian EMI set: 3C 153.53790-95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

He also reported that Concert Artist/Fidelio Records in England have released the following recordings:

- **Chopin**
  - 51 Mazurkas (posthumously ed.)
    - Cassettes CE4-TC-7001/3

- **Chopin**
  - Polonaise-Fantasy (and items previously released)
    - Cassette CE4-TC-7005

- **Schumann**
  - Sonata in G minor
    - Cassette CE4-TC-7009

- **Liszt**
  - Funérailles
  - Bénédiction
  - Liebestraum No.3

- **Beethoven**
  - Some of the Sonatas.
A Cortot Discography

Charles Timbrell

Even in today's era of super-efficient pianism (and super-efficient editing techniques) the musical force of Cortot's best recordings can rivet one's attention and astonish one's ear. Contrary to popular opinion, he had a very big technique in his prime, as is clear from his earliest versions of Chopin's 24 Preludes (1926), 4 Ballades (1929), Fantasy (1933), B Minor Sonata (1933) and 24 Etudes (1933/34). And musically, his variety of touch and unique combination of eloquence and elegance have often been compared with Chopin's reported style of playing.

A list of "Cortot's Best" would include, besides the versions of works listed above, the Saint-Saëns Fourth Concerto, Franck's two big solo works and "Variations symphoniques," much memorable Schumann, the Weber Second Sonata, and all the chamber works recorded with Thibaud and Casals. From these fervent, poetic and always spontaneous-sounding interpretations there is much that today's pianist can learn. Fortunately, many recordings that were out of print for years have just recently come back on the market.

My discography grew out of early attempts to determine which versions I owned of certain works, for Cortot made as many as four versions of some of them. After that I became interested in knowing the variety and extent of his repertoire, which was unusually large—from Purcell to "Petrovich." Only after I had completed most of my research did I learn of a 1957 discography by Clough and Cuming (in Gramophone Record Review, December 1957, pages 135-136). I have been able, in effect, to bring that up to date in several ways: by including the latest reissues (primarily American and Japanese); by including new first issues of "live" performances; by furnishing, when possible, the year of the recording (in some cases this must be approximate); and by referring both to Cortot's piano rolls and to his unsung recordings. For much of this information I am indebted to the generous help of Cortot's pupil Guthrie Luke.

Appendix

Cortot made a number of PIANO ROLLS for Duo-art and Ampico, but they are not reliable reproductions of his playing. At least three LPs have been made from them, and they are of interest primarily for certain works that Cortot did not record otherwise (or that have not been commercially released). These include Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 109 and the Scherzo of Sonata, Op. 106; Chabrier's Idylle and Feuillet d'album (all on Klavier 110) Fauré's Berceuse from "Dolly" (arr. Cortot) and Schubert's Impromptu Op. 142, No. 3 (on Everest X-908).

A third category of recordings consists of ones that were made but never issued. These include Albeniz's "Triana," Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 27/2, Chabrier's Idylle and Scherzo-Valse, later versions of the 4 Chopin Ballades and the Chant Polonaise No. 1. Fauré's Berceuse from "Dolly" (arr. Cortot) and A-flat Song Without Words, a 1947 version of Franck's Prelude, Aria and Finale, the Gluck-Brahms Gavotte, and a mid-1950s version of the Schumann Concerto with Markiewich. In addition, Cortot taped St. Chopin mazurkas (taping finished in October 1957), the Polonaise-Fantasy, and two unedited versions of all 32 Beethoven sonatas (plus a third version of portions from each sonata, to be used for teaching purposes).
## ABBREVIATIONS

- **ac** = acoustic recording (pre-electrical, pre-1925)
- **HMV** = His Master's Voice. All of Cortot's recordings were made by this English firm unless otherwise noted
- In the HMV column below, the Victor numbers are for the American issues of these recordings (or, rarely, original releases).

- **C** = Cetra
- **FC** = Fonotip Cetra
- **GEMI** = German EMI (Electrola)
- **GR** = Great Recording issue by Japanese EMI (Toshiba)
- **REF** = French EMI, Référence Series
- **RPL** = Italian Replica
- **RR** = Discocorp
- **Sera** = Saphir

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### Appendix

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<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
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### Notes

- All items marked with an asterisk (*) are currently available on a 7-record set by French EMI VSM C153.03.0906.
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Finis