

ALFRED CORTOT, PORTRAIT OF A SCHOOL FOUNDER

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ABSTRACT

As a musician dedicated to redefining the French interwar musical landscape, Cortot left a deep imprint on the development of the European as well as Romanian musical art and pedagogy. A versatile personality, a true artisan of multiple spheres – pianist, teacher, writer, politician –, Cortot was one of the most influential personalities of the musical art. This paper evokes his personality through the filter of his biographical data, of the writings about him, as well as through that of his activity as a teacher. Highlighting his personality is all the more necessary as the academic year 2019-2020 marked the joint 100th anniversary of the foundation of the two institutions: the "Gheorghe Dima" National Academy of Music and the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*, a prestigious institution founded by Cortot, where many pianists and teachers from Cluj received specialized training. As custodians of his teachings, they celebrate a noble lineage through their performances.

Keywords: *Alfred Cortot, piano, École Normale de Musique, "Gheorghe Dima" National Academy of Music, centennial anniversary*

Introduction

As a musician dedicated to redefining the French interwar musical landscape, Cortot left a deep imprint on the development of the European as well as Romanian musical art and pedagogy.

Highlighting his personality is all the more necessary as the academic year 2019-2020 marked the joint 100th anniversary of the foundation of the two institutions: the "Gheorghe Dima" National Academy of Music and the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*. Numerous pianists and professors from Cluj received specialized training at the prestigious Parisian institution and attended its master classes. The evocation of Cortot's personality is therefore a debt of honour and an important moment of anamnesis, dictated by the calendar.

1. Biography

Many researchers have focused their attention on Alfred Cortot's life, probing his versatile personality from various perspectives.¹ Each one contributed to the revelation of the artist's achievements and of his aura, which continues to illuminate the new generations through his numerous writings, recordings, annotated editions of certain scores and famous master classes. We will therefore present a compressed version of his biographical profile, as an addendum to the already existing writings.

Alfred Cortot was born in Nyon, in 1877. Bernard Gavoty remarked that the choice of his career was based on his parents' desire to steer their son towards art, and not necessarily on the child's preferences or skills. They believed that passion and patience were enough for one to succeed in any activity; a debatable idea, by no means, but confirmed in this case by the later evolution of the young man, who took up piano studies at the Paris Conservatory, with Émile Decombes (a pupil of Chopin) and Louis Diémer. His first major success was a *First Prize* at the piano competition, obtained at the age of 19. His *début* as a soloist took place a year later, in 1897, at *Concerts Colonne*, where he performed Beethoven's *Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 37. It was an impressive artistic performance, received with great enthusiasm by public and critics alike and at the same time the prelude to a long series of successes.

However, Alfred Cortot felt that the keyboard was not enough for him to express his emotions. After he won the *Premier Prix*, Pleyel's house offered him a trip to Bayreuth, where he met Cosima Wagner, Liszt's daughter and Richard Wagner's widow. In his youth, he wanted to become a conductor, and the discovery of the German composer's music exacerbated that desire in him. Thus, the Bayreuth moment had a catalytic effect, being the place where he began his conducting career in 1898, as an assistant to Felix Josef von Mottl and Hans Richter. This experience

¹ Bernard Gavoty, François Anselmini and Rémi Jacobs, Jean-Luc Tingaud, Inès Taillandier-Guitard, Taylor Karen.

determined the solid training that would bear fruit shortly afterwards in the capital of France, where he conducted the *Twilight of the Gods* and *Tristan and Isolde*, in 1902.

His projects as a conductor did not diminish his activity as a pianist. After the resounding success with *Tristan*, the musician resumed his piano studies, showing a special interest in chamber music. In 1905, he formed a trio together with Jacques Thibaud and Pablo Casals, which became famous and was at the forefront of musical life for a long time, until 1944.

Between 1907 and 1923, Alfred Cortot taught at the Paris Conservatory of Music, where he trained students who would follow in his footsteps in interpretive mastery: Clara Haskil, Yvonne Lefébure, Magda Tagliaferro, Marcelle Meyer, Vlado Perlemuter. His frequent tours in Europe and the USA made it impossible for him to focus exclusively on teaching. Therefore, in 1919, Cortot founded the *École Normale de Musique*, where he developed the teaching curriculum that included the most diverse subjects, with a special emphasis on the history and theory of music.²

Cortot's repertoire included a wide range of styles, from Purcell to Stravinsky, although the centrepiece was romantic music, for which he had a declared preference. We notice in particular his affinity for the music of Chopin, whose oeuvre he recorded in its entirety. Cortot gave lectures on the studies, ballads, preludes and waltzes of the Polish bard, gathering his thoughts in a landmark book entitled *Aspects de Chopin*, published by Albin Michel Publishing House, in 1949.

The number of disc recordings was considerable, comprising many reference works (only Arthur Rubinstein surpassed his performance). Through his performances both as a soloist and as a member of the aforementioned trio, Cortot amazed the audience with his lyrical delicacy and the nobleness and wide variety of pianistic timbre.

He was a pioneer in the approach of contemporary French music, to the promotion of which he dedicated three books; the subtle analyses contained in the 500 pages of the books, as well as the recordings of pieces by Debussy and Ravel outline the ideal profile of the performer of French music. In addition to the two great Impressionists, Cortot's book includes analyses and commentaries on the music of César Franck, Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, Paul Dukas, Vincent d'Indy, Florent Schmitt, Maurice Emmanuel, Albert Roussel, Erik Satie, in a manner that demonstrates his profound ability to analyse the musical pieces, which is of paramount importance in understanding the evolution of piano art and entirely relevant to the interpretive approach. From the plethora of books, articles, prefaces and annotated scores, we understand that for Cortot writing was very close to the

² One aspect that characterized Cortot's personality was the fact that he reformed the French music educational system. The *École Normale* founded by him became a consistent counterweight to the Conservatory of Music, exerting a strong influence on the French educational system, which has endured to this day.

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art of performance, a link between the artist on stage and the audience: "My books are the notes of a performer who wants to share his impressions with the listeners of his favourite works, creating in them a state of receptivity similar to his own. They do not pursue so much the rigour of a musical analysis and the ingenuity of an aesthetic consideration, as the expression of the poetic character of the compositions they deal with."³ At the same time, Cortot compiled and supervised the editions of Chopin's, Schumann's and Liszt's oeuvres, published by the Parisian Publishing House Salabert. They are regarded as ideal "*éditions de travail*" and include useful technical exercises. His writings had a highly significant and impactful pedagogical value that endured over time – they are still valid today – and across space, since they have been adopted worldwide and continue to be considered as reference works within the international bibliographic spectrum.

His knowledge and affinity for the German culture facilitated his collaboration with authorities from the neighbouring country between 1940 and 1944, when the German army occupied France. Beyond his artistic activity, Alfred Cortot accepted positions in the Vichy government, which presented him with opportunities to give concerts in Germany. These missteps, unforgivable in the eyes of his country's regime, led to him being declared a *persona non grata* by the French society.⁴ However, he continued his projects with the same devotion and abandoned teaching only in 1961, when he retired.⁵

Alfred Cortot was a passionate collector of autographs, literature, princeps editions, letters, portraits, coins and philatelic stamps. After his death, the huge collection of scores was taken over and divided among the British Museum, Newberry Library of Chicago and the University of California, Berkeley.

2. Cortot in the light of biographies

Starting from his confessions, from the importance that his activity as teacher, mentor and talent trainer had in the equation of his life, we have tried to find the right key to interpret his biography.

³Alfred Cortot, "Prefață" [Preface], in *Muzica franceză pentru pian* [French Piano Music], Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, Bucharest, 1966, p. 4.

⁴Alfred Cortot had a close collaboration with the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. During the war, Cortot accepted the conductor's invitation to give concerts in Germany; he gave his first free concert at the French Foyer in Berlin and performed daily for the French prisoners. Thus, Cortot became the first French musician to play in Nazi Germany; he also made two concert tours in this country, in June and November 1942, which ended up being highly controversial.

⁵Between 1940 and 1941, Cortot led several missions within the General Secretariat of Fine Arts. After the war, he regained his status as an international pianist, giving almost a thousand concerts worldwide between 1945 and 1958. In 1952, Japan even gave his name to one of its islands – Cortoshima.

The Greek term for educating someone is *rythmízomai*; to educate therefore implies the idea of "setting someone's rhythm", of giving them a certain dynamic regularity, of adjusting their pace. This identification of education with rhythm, with putting man in an order that makes him have a coherent, vivid portrait, is essential for understanding the purpose of education.

Cortot's life is closely linked to the idea of education, mentoring, harmony and rhythmic coherence, anchored in the cadence of fortunate intersections. Cortot was not a miracle child, but rather the fruit of the "miraculous encounters" in his life. He was, on the one hand, the fruit of the fine education offered by his family, and then became himself a fine educator, who offered rhythm and understanding to his disciples. It is important to emphasize that he was also the prototype of the teacher who encouraged students to progress at their own pace of development, according to the idea that each student must find their own way using their own tools. This is, in fact, the great thesis of the European Enlightenment. The individual must cut himself off from the "minority" of thinking and must reason for himself. Basically, each individual is his own raw material with which he has to work for his entire life, while education, through the teachers it engages, is the benevolent "push" received from outside.

Therefore, the key to reading his biography is that of his development as a result of the "miraculous (real and spiritual) encounters" that marked his evolution. Émile Décombe (the teacher who discovered him and offered him the chance to attend his classes at the Conservatory), Edouard Reisler⁶, Auguste Mangeot (co-founder of the *École Normale de Musique*), Pablo Casals, Jacques Thibaud (his trio colleagues) are names translated into fortunate encounters that marked Cortot's human and artistic path. Spiritually, Chopin, Schumann and Wagner were those who decisively marked his artistic pursuits and to whom the musician dedicated much of his teaching and interpretive resources.

It is necessary to make one last remark in this context of his evolution through the fortunate intersection of destinies. A horizon of expectations is required as a precondition for such encounters; "in order to meet someone, you must have a purposeful waiting."⁷ Alfred Cortot was the tenacious, studious, disciplined man, with a great zest for work – as he himself confessed in interviews –, driven by passion, love of music and people, who knew how to make the most of the chances that came his way.

⁶ In an era of Wagnerian adulation, Cortot followed in the same tone, offering the Parisians, together with Edouard Reisler, a series of concerts for two pianos, in which the two performed arrangements of Wagner's works.

⁷ Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceau, *Dialoguri de duminică. O introducere în categoriile vieții* [Sunday Dialogues. An Introduction to the Categories of Life], Humanitas, 2015, p. 176.

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All these influences coalesced into a harmonious life, led under the sign of the musician's vocation, in which, among the many and various achievements, those of the teacher and reformer of the French education system also shine.

3. The Pianist: interpretive choices

He looked for the opium in music

Daniel Barenboim

Cortot's artistic career spanned more than six decades, dovetailing harmoniously with that of the teacher. He reached the peak of his career in the interwar period: it was then that he gave most of his concerts and numerous lectures, wrote most of his theoretical works, made over 150 recordings and founded the prestigious School that bears his name.

Given Alfred Cortot's protean artistic personality, it is quite difficult for us to characterize him as a performer, especially as his stage performances were of unequal value (which is only natural in a musician's professional career). Professor Philippe Cassard considers Cortot relevant as a pianist only until the 1940s, due to his impressive, valuable record, which includes outstanding concerts and recordings. Once he got involved in politics, the quality, time and energy dedicated to the piano activity decreased, which was reflected in the quality of his artistic performances.

4. Cortot, a philosopher of piano playing

If we were to sift out the hallmarks of Alfred Cortot's artistic personality, his first great quality, which distinguished him from other pianists of his time, was that of a thinker, of a *philosopher of piano playing*. It was his preeminent quality, while philosophy and problematization were his ideal in interpretation, the ultimate goal of piano playing. Whatever he experienced, learned, practised, felt or read was true to his goal, namely that of subsuming music under something higher than a mechanical execution of the pieces. This explains the synesthetic convergences of his pedagogical commentaries. This aspect was emphasized by his colleague, Maestro Alfredo Casella: "Cortot represents the rare example of a man who thinks at the keyboard"⁸ [our emphasis]. This is closely related to his vast body of knowledge. Alfred Cortot was a *uomo universale*, a Renaissance spirit, dedicated to the knowledge of the world.

The historiographical research initiated by him and which he conjoins with the interpretive approach is correlated with the cultural and scientific trend of the

⁸ "Cortot réalise le cas très rare d'un homme qui pense devant le clavier" (our emphasis). Alfredo Casella, *apud* Bernard Gavoty, *Alfred Cortot. Biographie*, Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1977, p. 290.

time in the field of music. Cortot began his teaching and performing career at a time when music history had already crystallized as a science in itself. It was the time of the writings of Romain Rolland, André Pirro, Paul-Marie Masson, and before them, of those signed by Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, professor of music history and theory at the Conservatory since 1878. Also, Cortot's time saw the dawn of what we call today the historically informed performance; that is, that musical-historical consciousness translated into a growing interest in old music, in the period instruments, in performance according to its specific spirit and style, an intense interest cultivated by Louis Diémer and later by harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, teacher at the *École Normale* in Paris. In this respect, Cortot did not seek so much to obtain the original sound (although this was also very important), but rather to understand and include the original thought in his performance.

In his writings, Cortot evokes a rather rare aspect, invoked by other piano masters as well: the *spiritual dimension*, the religious values of music. In a nineteenth-century world in which "God is dead" (as Nietzsche declared in 1882), Cortot understands and puts forth the idea of piano interpretation as a new form of relating to divinity, of concerts as a manifestation of communion. In his courses and writings, he often referred to this aspect, to the almost priestly mission of the musician, claiming that this profession was an extension of a sacred duty. "Music must be dangerously, sublimely contagious. [...] You must, unabatedly, tirelessly, try to discover its secret, to ardently give it all the resources of your imagination and love. And the works you perform, with this ever-deepening understanding of the profound mystery of art, can give birth, in a sacred moment of your studies, to this inner thrill that makes you feel the closeness of the artistic truth. On that day, your technique will evolve, without a doubt, more efficiently than during months of aimless exercises, pointless scale drills, or sterile virtuosity. It will eventually become the means and not the goal, and this moral necessity in the service of which you will put your fingers, namely that of expressing your thoughts, will allow you to be a performer and not an executor"⁹. Cortot saw the activity of a pianist as the extension of a moral, sacred, holy mission, with spiritual implications. In his view, a pianist is, above all, a musician, and a musician is a higher entity, who passes through the filter of his imagination, of his emotional, cognitive and spiritual universe, the composer's message.¹⁰

⁹ Alfred Cortot *apud* Jeanne Thieffry, "Les Cours d'Interprétation à l'École Normale de Musique", *Le Monde musical*, No. 11-12, Year 33, 1922, p. 210.

¹⁰ The inscription on Cortot's tombstone says: "Alfred Cortot: musician".

5. Cortot – the teacher

5.1. Advice for young teachers

Alfred Cortot had a few clear and important guidelines on education and its pedagogical means. In a brochure written by Cortot for the students of the *École Normale* studying to become teachers, he makes the following recommendations:

1. “Always start from the principle that the student must be won over to the cause of music; weak students are the honour of good teachers. There is no merit in developing the talent of a gifted student, but there is an infinite joy in arousing the taste for music and the intelligence of performance in a reluctant personality;
2. Make your students love you. Remember that, especially with beginners, the desire to please their teacher and get a word of encouragement generally exceeds the intrinsic value of their effort;
3. Practising music, with its complicated rules, the difficult and devoid of musical pleasure first contacts with the instrument can appear of utmost futility, unless a perspective and some attractive examples are provided;
4. Establish a sense of absolute fairness for all students. Do not show personal preferences or lack of interest. All students have the right to receive the same attention from the teacher;
5. You have to restrain yourselves from ridiculing a student’s mistakes in front of his classmates. Encourage rather than discourage them;
6. Make them love music in general, not just the piano;
7. Remember, the way you teach will be a model for your disciples in their future work as teachers”.¹¹

Beyond their rigour and efficiency, Cortot’s principles reflect his psychological refinement, which was one of the cornerstones of his pedagogical approach. His recommendations are aimed at precise objectives, including all the parameters that must be taken into account in the student’s pianistic evolution: technical, interpretive and methodical. These practical principles stand at the very core of a special mission of the teacher, who would not just have to give “piano lessons”¹² – a phrase that horrified Cortot. He preferred to say instead “love lessons for art.”

Cortot believed that what one discovers by oneself is the most valuable thing, he advised his students to think, he taught them how to learn: to identify the essentials in a score, to know how to prepare a sheet with its points and subpoints of analysis, to organize a topic based on logical structures, in order to make a coherent presentation.

In fact, Cortot resorts to a metaphor that underpins many of the educational approaches, namely the agrarian metaphor: the mind is originally conceived as a

¹¹ Bernard Gavoty, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-315.

¹² *Idem*, p. 311.

bare uncultivated land. The school, the teacher in the generic sense, comes and nurtures this uncultivated soil, irrigates it, gives it the right fertilizers, the cultural accumulations of mankind, makes it fruitful, transforms a wild apple tree into a cultivated one.¹³

All these ideas were applied by Cortot in his master classes, which became true events of the musical world.

5.2. The master classes

The performance classes held at the *École Normale* were a novelty in the French musical education landscape. These classes were organized at the initiative of Auguste Mangeot and gathered great names of the field of pedagogy and interpretive art, bringing prestige to the School.

Every June or July, for three weeks, dozens of performers from many countries and nearly five hundred listeners gathered in the ENMP concert hall, eager to hear Cortot's ideas about Romanticism or the French piano literature. Participants often sat right on the stage, behind Cortot and the two Pleyel concert pianos – not only to get a good idea of the methods, but also for reasons of space. Cortot allowed certain courses to be published; they are quite detailed and faithfully reveal the atmosphere. He spoke extensively, explained technical points, but especially explained the essential spirit of the music that he wished to communicate to a passionate audience.

From the school documents and the graduates' testimonies we learn that a piano lesson given by Alfred Cortot was a plea for the unparalleled charm of art. Before touching the keys, it was very important to assimilate music cognitively. In this sense, as a preamble to the moment of performing on the piano, Cortot asked performers to undertake a complex analysis of the works. The students who wanted to play for him had to prepare an analytical sheet of the work they were going to perform. These sheets had to include the following data: surname, first name, date and place of birth and death of the composer; nationality of the composer; title of the work, opus number, date and dedicatee; the circumstances in which the work was composed (according to the composer's confessions); particularities of the piece (harmonic analysis, influences, analogies, filiations); character and meaning of the work (in the performer's opinion); aesthetic and technical commentary, suggestions for study and interpretation.

Although Cortot was very particular about how these texts should be prepared by the young performers, his goal was not to perform a cold dissection of the score, but to develop their imagination, their own critical thinking skills, or their ability to argue, as a process of understanding the work in its complexity. After

¹³ From a culture of the soil, *cultus agrorum*, education becomes a culture of the soul: *cultura animae* (Cicero).

correcting the notes in front of the class, the student would move on to performing the piece. Following his own recommendations, Cortot would listen to the piece without interruption, with the utmost attention. His calmness, infinite patience and discretion in those moments of great emotional tension for the young performers gave confidence and courage even to the most timid of them.

Cortot believed that the emotion of an era is translated through its people of genius. Therefore, the questions that the students had to answer became more nuanced: what is the date of composition? What were the highlights of that period? How is this work positioned in the composer's overall output? What are the previous compositions as well as the later ones? What are the stylistic influences? Are there any possible analogies with other works? Under what circumstances was the work written? For what purpose? Who was it dedicated to?

Cortot recommended a similar research plan regarding the composer: what is his nationality, his education? What are the events that marked his life? Where did he travel and what did he visit? Did he live and compose in other countries? What were the readings that influenced him? Did the composer leave notes or letters about his published works?

All these ramifications of the investigative approach converged towards an authentic, historically informed performance, so necessary to the interpretive act.

Perhaps there are musicologists and theorists who challenge Cortot's approach, who believe that understanding music is achieved not through knowledge, but through experience. But as musicologist Francisc László believed, the theoretical approach of the musical phenomenon is beneficial, facilitating its experience even through its relative and partial understanding.¹⁴

Through his complex activity – as a pianist, pedagogue and writer –, Alfred Cortot was one of the most influential musicians of the twentieth century. The great musician was a dedicated, daring and visionary cultural ambassador. The bridges he created through music between the two art institutions, the "Gheorghe Dima"

¹⁴ The musicologist even launches a parallel between music and the science of God: "Everything that has been said about Him over the millennia is just a lot of minor contributions compared to His greatness. Theology will never fully explain God. If His being could be explained by theology, He would cease to be God. [...] music is a kind of divinity, an unknowable absolute, which, nevertheless, does not mean that we do not have the moral obligation to get as close to it as we can, with our pedestrian means and methods of knowledge. I suffer from the immense distance that separates me from the total understanding of music far less than I enjoy the steps I take towards it", in an interview conducted by Oleg Garaz, *Ars musicologica – mousike și logos, exerciții și experiențe de cartografiere a muzicalității* [Ars Musicologica – Mousike and Logos, Exercises and Experiences of Mapping Musicality], in *Poetica muzicală* [Musical Poetics], Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 155. Available in digital format at https://www.academia.edu/11403127/Ars_Musicologica_-_Logos_%C5%9Fi_Mousike_exerci%C5%A3ii_%C5%9Fi_experien%C5%A3e_ale_me%C5%9Fte%C5%9Fugului_de_cartografiere_muzical%C4%83_interviu_cu_muzicologul_Laszlo_Ferenc_text_publicat_%C3%AE_n_volumul_Poetica_muzical%C4%83_%C3%AE_n_convorbiri_Editura_Casa_C%C4%83r%C5%A3ii_de_%C5%9Etiin%C5%A3%C4%83_Cluj-Napoca_2003_pp._145-169, accessed September 1, 2020.

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Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca and the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*, have endured to this day.

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