

DLA Dissertation Abstract

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Alfred Cortot's interpretative approach to Chopin

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## **I. Background**

The intensely personal nature of Alfred Cortot's interpretations of Chopin, as heard in his recordings, with their massive rhythmic freedoms and idiosyncratic timbres, can be questioned by musicians today, given how performance practices have changed so significantly over the past century. But Cortot's recordings do nevertheless speak to contemporary listeners, despite technical inaccuracies no longer generally accepted, and the question arises: to what do we owe the evident extraordinary expressivity that remains so timelessly relevant?

Cortot has been extensively researched over the years. The most extensive doctoral dissertations are those of Karen M. Taylor of 1988 and Inès Taillandier-Guittard of 2013. The former covers biographical events and the pedagogical and performance achievements of the master, while the latter analyses, with the aid of software, Cortot's recordings of the 24 Preludes—placing his art in a broader aesthetic context. Cortot's friend and first biographer Bernard Gavoty published a book about him, while later his erstwhile student Thomas Manshardt summarised what

he had gained from Cortot's classes, taking a systematic and practical approach. In 2018 François Anselmini and Rémi Jacobs wrote another Cortot biography, more than half a century after his death, derived from historical documents.

In my dissertation, rather than focusing on historical details and theoretical issues, I examine Cortot's performance art from an applied perspective, with a view to offering measures of support to the daily work of pianists.

## **II. Sources**

In addition to Cortot's extensive discography, his writings revealed to me his art and insights in depth: his densely annotated, instructive music editions ("éditions de travail"); his book on Chopin (*Aspects de Chopin*); his three-volume book on French music (*La musique française de piano*); his methodology of piano technique (*Les principes rationnels de la technique pianistique*); his journal articles (in *Le Monde Musical* and *Conferencia*); and a book (*Cours d'interprétation*) published from notes taken in his lessons. Cortot's writings are rich in detail and

interest. They articulate comprehensively his refined cultural and aesthetic ideals. In addition, extant audio recordings of his master classes and radio interviews have provided me with valuable insights into his artistic endeavours.

Beyond these original materials, the above referenced dissertations, biographies and publications served as valuable secondary sources.

In July 2021, I had the great privilege of interviewing Colette Maze, a 107-year-old pupil of Cortot's, still active and still playing the piano. Mme Maze, whom I visited at her home in Paris, related to me wonderful personal recollections of Cortot and those days. She described his philosophy: not necessarily to play the notes in the score with perfect accuracy, but rather to prioritise giving realisation to the deep creativity that lies behind the notes, through wide-ranging imaginative interpretation.

### **III. Method**

The focus of my research is on Alfred Cortot's interpretative approach to the Chopin oeuvre. The core of

the dissertation comprises the chapters analysing his Chopin performances.

Through a review of the available sources, three main factors emerge as Cortot's interpretative criteria: the inspirational role of poetic imagery and extra-musical references in his lively renditions; the evocation at the piano of the richness and intensity of orchestral sound; and the free but organic treatment of time in his rubato playing.

I have chosen the four *Ballades* through which to examine these phenomena in depth, in part because of the ancient literary origins of the ballad genre, to which may be added a presumed if unconfirmed connection to *Ballads and Romances* (*Ballady i romanse*), a seminal collection of Polish Romantic poems written by Adam Mickiewicz in 1822. Additionally, the extended length of the *Ballades*, relative to much of Chopin's output, makes them particularly suitable points of departure for exploring Cortot's three guiding principles.

My study of timbre includes other Chopin compositions as well, to complete the picture of this aspect of Cortot's approach. In evaluating the rubato that is so central to Cortot's art, I applied the Sonic Visualiser

software to measure the micro-timings observable in the master's recordings. The website of the AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music provided valuable assistance over the use of this application. Exploring Cortot's technique, I compared his treatise on the subject with surviving accounts by his students.

To place these various analytical chapters in context, I compiled a summary: Cortot's view of Chopin, his general understanding of the essence of interpretation and the turning points in his career, all based on the written sources referred to above.

#### **IV. Results**

My primary objective in choosing Alfred Cortot as the subject of my dissertation was to gain insights from the master's fascinating and intensely personal approaches to interpretation and pianism that could enrich my work as a performer and, ideally, the work of others as well. The exploration of Cortot's historical facts and his copious analyses of Chopin's works has already been well covered by musicologists.

Understanding and applying performance freedom has been a long-standing preoccupation of mine: finding organic flexibility without arbitrarily overriding the internal laws of the music; and following the precise notations of musical scores—Chopin’s in particular—without unimaginative servility. I found Alfred Cortot’s interpretative approach to be an ideal example of the application of these musical principles and aspirations. My dissertation occupies a niche as the first major analysis of Alfred Cortot’s applied performance art in the Hungarian language.

Cortot’s free, quasi-improvisational way of playing Chopin was nevertheless underpinned by rigorous research: I have indicated how events in the composer’s life, the circumstances of the works’ creation and the internal structure of each piece contribute significantly to the meaning that the master finds behind the notes on the page. Cortot adapted his timbre and musical narrative to this meaning, and not to the literal order of the notes. In this way—informatively—the expressive content and the tonal and temporal proportions of his performances remain

unchanged between recordings made several decades apart, while seemingly sounding spontaneous.

Finally, I have explored how Cortot's rich palette of imagination, and his career arc exceeding by far the traditions of the French piano school of the time, were shaped by his deep interest in other forms of art, not least the poetic world of Wagner's music drama and Cortot's parallel career as a conductor.

## **V. Performances**

Concerts in which I have played Chopin and/or French repertoire.

**26 September 2017** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, with Mikhail Mering, clarinet. Saint-Saëns: Sonata in E-flat major for Clarinet and Piano, Op.167.

**20 January 2018** Schipluiden, Op Hodenpijl, The Netherlands, Solo Recital. Debussy: Estampes.

**10 March 2018** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Kupola Hall, Day of Talent. Chopin/Liszt: Six Polish Songs, S.480—5. My Enchantress, 3. The Ring, 4. The Merryman.

**12 March 2018** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, Doctoral Concert. Debussy: Estampes.



**11 July 2018** Krakow, Jagiellonian University, Polish Music Festival. Chopin: Don Juan Variations, Op.2; Chopin: Nocturne in C minor, Op.48, No.1.

**21 October 2018** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, Doctoral Concert. Chopin: Preludes, Op.28, Nos.1–8; Don Juan Variations, Op.2.

**28 October 2018** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, Doctoral Concert. Chopin: Preludes, Op.28, Nos.1–8.

**29 October 2018** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, Doctoral Concert. Chopin/Liszt: Six Polish Songs, S.480.

**23 November 2018** Sárvár, Koncz János School of Arts, Interactive Concert for Children and Music Teachers. Saint-Saëns: The Carnival of the Animals, Daquin: The Cuckoo; Rameau: The Hen; Chopin: Waltz in D-flat major, Op.64, No.1; Chopin: Waltz in F major, Op.34, No.3.

**21 May 2019** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Room X, Doctoral Complex Exam. Selection of keyboard works by Couperin.

**29 May 2019** Budapest, Lumen Café, Concert of the DOSz Musicology Department, National Alliance of Doctoral Students. Chopin: Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op.64, No.2; Prelude in D minor, Op.28; Nocturne in C minor, Op.48, No.1.

**3 June 2019** Budapest, CEU, Oktober Hall, Classical Beats at CEU—Literature Meets Music. Chopin: Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op.64, No.2; Prelude in D minor, Op.28.

**22 July 2019** Vigántpetend, Roman Catholic Church, Valley of Arts Festival. Selection of keyboard works by Couperin; Chopin: Preludes, Op.28, Nos.1–8; Chopin: Rondo in E-flat major, Op.16; Chopin: Nocturne in C minor, Op.48, No.1; Debussy: Estampes.

**26 September 2019** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Solti Hall, Chamber Music Concert “The Unknown Chopin” with Eszter Karasszon, cello and Zsófia Stasznyi, soprano. Chopin: Introduction et Polonaise Brillante, Op.3; Chopin/Liszt: Six Polish Songs, S.480; Chopin: Rondo in E-flat major, Op.16; Chopin: Allegro de Concert, Op.46; Chopin: Polish Songs (selection); Chopin: Grand Duo Concertante, Dbop.16A.

**18 November 2019** Budapest Music Centre Library, Classical Contemporaries—Contemporary Classics. Ravel: Gaspard de la nuit: Le gibet.

**28 February 2020** Budapest, Bartók Music Hall of Rákoshegy, Chamber Concert with Miranda Liu, violin and Judit Szabó, cello. Debussy: Trio in G major; Ravel: Trio in A minor.

**30 November 2020** Budapest, Marble Hall of the Hungarian Radio, Recital with Vilmos Oláh, violin. Franck: Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano.

**30 March 2021** Budapest, Liszt Academy, Great Hall, Chamber Concert with Eszter Karasszon, cello and András Keller, violin. Fauré: Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano, Op.117; Fauré: Piano Trio in D minor, Op.120.

**2 October 2021** Budapest, Old Music Academy, Chamber Hall, Solo Recital. Rameau: Suite in E minor; Debussy: Suite bergamasque

**3 December 2022** Selinunte, Parco Archeologico, Italy, Chamber Recital with Maya Levy, violin. Franck: Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano.

**7 December 2022** Budapest, Korean Cultural Centre, Solo Recital. Couperin: Les barricades mystérieuses; Chopin: Impromptu in F-sharp major, Op.36; Chopin/Liszt: Six Polish Songs, S.480—1. The Maiden's Wish; Debussy: Estampes—La soirée dans Grenade, Les jardins sous la pluie.

**16 December 2022** Vicari, Teatro della Libertà, Italy, Solo Recital. Couperin: Les barricades mystérieuses; Chopin: Impromptu in F-sharp major, Op.36; Chopin/Liszt: Six Polish Songs, S.480—1. The Maiden's

Wish, 5. My Enchantress; Debussy: Estampes; Debussy: Suite bergamasque—Clair de lune

**24 March 2023** Budapest, Ötpacsirta Salon, Solo Recital, “Evocations—Fantasy”. Chopin: Fantasia-impromptu, Op.posth.66; Debussy: La cathédrale engloutie; Debussy: Estampes—La soirée dans Grenade.

**19 April 2023** Budapest, Ötpacsirta Salon, Solo Recital, “Evocations—Rhapsody”. Chopin: Scherzo in E major, Op.54.

**9 May 2023** Sopron, Ligneum Visitor Centre, Chamber Music Recital on the occasion of the Day of Birds and Trees, with Eszter Karasszon, cello. Debussy: Estampes—Les jardins sous la pluie; Saint-Saëns: The Carnival of the Animals—The Swan.

**25 May 2023** Budapest, Ötpacsirta Salon, Solo Recital, “Evocations—One Thousand and One Nights”. Chopin: Nocturne in E-flat major, Op.9, No.2; Debussy: Estampes—Les jardins sous la pluie; Debussy: Suite bergamasque—Clair de lune.