

## Chopin - Preludes, Impromptus (Alfred Cortot) [2006]

Wpisany przez bluesever

Poniedziałek, 25 Październik 2010 16:25 - Zmieniony Piątek, 04 Październik 2013 10:35

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1. Preludes Op. 28 No. 1 in C major (Agitato) 0:38 2. Preludes Op. 28 No. 2 in A minor (Lento) 2:16 3. Preludes Op. 28 No. 3 in G major (Vivace) 0:58 4. Preludes Op. 28 No. 4 in E minor (Largo) 1:49 5. Preludes Op. 28 No. 5 in D major (Allegro molto) 0:36 6. Preludes Op. 28 No. 6 in B minor (Lento assai) 1:49 7. Preludes Op. 28 No. 7 in A major (Andantino) 0:38 8. Preludes Op. 28 No. 8 in F sharp minor (Molto agitato) 1:40 9. Preludes Op. 28 No. 9 in E major (Largo) 1:13 10. Preludes Op. 28 No. 10 in C sharp minor (Allegro molto) 0:31 11. Preludes Op. 28 No. 11 in B major (Vivace) 0:30 12. Preludes Op. 28 No. 12 in G sharp minor (Presto) 1:06 13. Preludes Op. 28 No. 13 in F sharp major (Lento) 2:31 14. Preludes Op. 28 No. 14 in E flat minor (Allegro) 0:32 15. Preludes Op. 28 No. 15 in D flat major (Sostenuto) 4:42 16. Preludes Op. 28 No. 16 in B flat minor (Presto con fuoco) 1:02 17. Preludes Op. 28 No. 17 in A flat major (Allegretto) 2:38 18. Preludes Op. 28 No. 18 in F minor (Allegro molto) 0:47 19. Preludes Op. 28 No. 19 in E flat major (Vivace) 1:15 20. Preludes Op. 28 No. 20 in C minor (Largo) 1:24 21. Preludes Op. 28 No. 21 in B flat major (Cantabile) 1:36 22. Preludes Op. 28 No. 22 in G minor (Molto agitato) 0:46 23. Preludes Op. 28 No. 23 in F major (Moderato) 0:42 24. Preludes Op. 28 No. 24 in D minor (Allegro appassionato) 2:30 25. Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 4:07 26. Berceuse in D flat Op. 57 4:08 [play](#) 27. Impromptus No. 1 in A flat Op. 29 3:44 [play](#) 28. Impromptus No. 2 in F sharp Op. 36 4:27 29. Impromptus No. 3 in G flat Op. 51 4:52 30. Fantaisie-impromptu in C sharp minor Op. 66 4:34 31. Barcarolle in F sharp major Op. 60 7:52

Alfred Cortot, piano

Like all true artists, the Swiss-born french pianist and conductor Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) was unique. His performances were indelibly stamped with their own inimitable brilliance and sensitivity. Under his hands the familiar became new-minted as he somehow restored the youth and first glory to great works of art.

Today, when it is customary to admire a more "correct" style of playing, Cortot's freedom and idiosyncrasy, which often led to confusion, strike some of today's pianists as undisciplined and erratic. But such people fail to realise that there are higher goals than discretion, or that an artist's ultimate aim is above and beyond a dogged and faithful reproduction of the score. In Cortot's own words, "the artist's real concern is less to play the notes than to translate the spirit that informs them". Cortot's performances were vitally recharged recreations, which somehow realised those inner qualities that pinpoint the music's life and character. Cortot, as much as anyone, made you realise that fundamental terms such as forte, piano, staccato or legato could have an infinitely wide and subtle variety of meanings. After his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Cortot emerged as a protean figure, a man who played the piano, conducted, taught, wrote and edited. His piano repertoire was immense, though in his final years he concentrated primarily on the Romantics: Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. His trio with Thibaud and Casals and his partnership with Maggie Teyte are two of music's enduring legends and his École Normale de Musique in Paris became the centre of a decisive influence that extended far beyond France. In 1902 Cortot produced and conducted Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. His repertoire also included *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* and he gave the first Paris performances of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Liszt's oratorio *Die Legende der Heiligen Elisabeth* and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. His piano masterclasses were no less memorable, and although his gifts as a mimic could make life uncomfortable for his less gifted pupils, they could still proudly claim to be part of "an advanced class of 800". But it is as a pianist that Cortot will always be remembered, and no one who saw and heard him will easily forget that superficially frail, slight and aesthetic figure with demurely crossed hands, which would suddenly unfold as he gave his audience what looked like a papal blessing. Cortot was an artist with a strong sense of occasion. By his own admission Cortot's two most influential teachers (apart from Louis Diémer at the Conservatoire) were Anton Rubinstein and Debussy's daughter Claude-Emma (known as "Chouchou"). After playing Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata to Rubinstein at the age of fifteen he was made sadder and wiser by the great pianist's blunt comment, "Beethoven cannot be played, he can only be recreated". Chouchou, too, left her mark. Cortot once played her father's *Préludes* to her and asked, "Did your Daddy play like that?" to which she replied: "Oh no, Daddy used to listen more". Later Cortot said, "I shall never forget a little girl still sailing on the magical ocean of innocence".

However, Cortot's greatest love was reserved for Chopin. An avid collector of Chopiniana, he would coax rings and umbrellas as well as priceless manuscripts from the Chopin scholar Arthur Hedley, and would entreat him: "You have something for me... Yes?" He recorded most of Chopin's major works several times and while argument rages over which offers the most definitive and inimitable Cortot, these 1933 and 1949 recordings show him at the height of his powers, inspired to penetrate to the very heart and elixir of Chopin. Here his technique may be erratic, his inaccuracies proverbial yet, paradoxically, no more "brilliant" or liberated performances exist. What desolation in the painful, crawling progressions of the A minor Prelude, and what vivacity in the dancing measures of the following G major Prelude's ray of light! Who but Cortot could create such firestorms of virtuosity in the 8th and 16th Preludes, who else has recreated the B flat minor Prelude's brilliant fury with such whiplash rhythmic aplomb, and who has reminded us, in the isolated Opus 45 Prelude, of Chopin's cloudy prophecy of late

Brahms?

Chopin's Four Impromptus may be among his more endearing rather than profound creations, but in Cortot's hands they sing and dance with all of the pianist's Gallic verve and poetry. Cortot's way with the Berceuse and Barcarolle, too, tells us that although, contrary to popular belief, he suffered over his inaccuracies, he remained steadfastly conscious that the odd wrong note or passing confusion was a small price to pay for the "opium" Daniel Barenboim once claimed Cortot discovered in Chopin. And after listening to these performances we may well join with Miss Jean Brodie (in Muriel Spark's novel) and confidently assert that truth and beauty rather than safety come first.

Appreciation of Cortot's artistry came in many forms. According to Bernard Gavoty writing in 1977, the pianist's Japanese admirers expressed their love by presenting him with an island christened "Cortoshima" (translated as "hermit in the island of dreams"). And they would undoubtedly have agreed with Gavoty that "when Cortot is no more, Chopin will die a second time" and that, in the words of the French pianist and Cortot pupil Yvonne Lefébure, "even his wrong notes were those of a God". *Bryce Morrisom*

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