

*Alfred Cortot*



ALFRED CORTOT was born at Nyon, Vaud, a French-speaking canton in Switzerland in 1877. However, his parents were French. His first piano teachers were his sisters. In 1886 the family moved to Paris. Initially he failed to pass the entrance exam for the Conservatoire, however, he sat in unofficially on the classes of Émile Descombes, one of the last surviving pupils of Chopin. He was then taught by Louis Diémer, a remarkable technician, but regarded by many as a dry player. In 1896 he left with a premier prix and rapidly became known for performances of the Beethoven concerti at the concerts Colonne and Lamoureux. After a series of highly acclaimed appearances at centres of music throughout Europe he was engaged at Bayreuth as an assistant conductor to Felix Mottl and Hans Richter. In 1902 he came back to Paris and founded La Société de Festival Lyrique. In 1903, at the age of 24, his début as a conductor with a performance of

*Die Götterdämmerung*, the first performance in French, was highly regarded and following performances of *Tristan und Isolde*, likewise in French, upheld and extended this reputation. At a concert society, which he founded himself, works he gave included Beethoven's Mass in D, Brahms's Requiem, Liszt's *St. Elizabeth*, *Parsifal* and works by Chabrier, Chausson, d'Indy and Roussel. In 1904 he became director of orchestral concerts at La Société Nationale, where he took the opportunity of introducing many works by young French composers. He was engaged by a similar society in Lille, where he gave a number of seasons of great music making. The trio which he founded in 1905 together with Jacques Thibaud and Pablo Casals lasted for three decades and was highly commended wherever it played. In 1907 he succeeded Raoul Pugno as professor of the Conservatoire's most advanced piano class. He was a gifted teacher, his pupils included Clara Haskil and Magda Tagliaferro, but he left 1923, when engagements elsewhere forced him to retire. Subsequently, he and Auguste Mangeot founded the École Normale de Musique at which he taught Raymond Lewenthal, Dinu Lipatti and Igor Markevich.

Cortot was regarded everywhere for the elegance and sensitivity of his playing, particularly of "romantic" music, above all for his performances of Chopin. His playing was that of an aristocrat and intellect, but, he was not an accurate player, particularly as he grew older, the numbers of wrong notes could not escape attention.

Cortot edited many works, particularly of Chopin, and wrote volumes on the appreciation of music and on the science of piano playing.

Cortot remained in France during the war and played in Germany for which he was afterwards much castigated and accused of collaboration. In 1946 he was allowed to play again, but his playing declined until he finally retired in 1958. He died in Geneva in 1962.

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