

EDUCATION

The ideal teacher

The great pianist and teacher Alfred Cortot devised exercises based on Chopin's principles. Today we can still benefit from his groundbreaking methods, says **Michael Stemberidge-Montavont**



Learning the piano with a former prodigy can be a risky proposition. Pianists who were formed at a very young age are often unable to explain how they play, and trying to replicate their way of playing is counterproductive for a pupil, particularly so if the model pianist has developed a highly individual and idiosyncratic technique. Unfortunately, many of great pianists fall into this category. But Alfred Cortot, who was one of the world's greatest piano teachers and also one of the greatest pianists, learnt his piano technique consciously through careful study and application. He was born in Nyon, Switzerland, in 1877, where his first teachers were his elder sisters Léa and Annette. Having decided that young Alfred was destined to be a virtuoso pianist, the family moved from their native Switzerland to Paris. Cortot, however, was not a prodigy and had already reached the advanced age of 14 when he was admitted to Louis Dièmer's class at the Paris Conservatoire in 1892.

As he described himself: 'my hands were flaccid, lacking muscle and rather clumsy. They often let me down, betraying my intentions. It took laborious exercises to loosen them while strengthening them at the same time.' On his second attempt, at the age of 18, Cortot received the *Premier Prix* – exceptionally the only first prize awarded that year.

The young musician was eager to pursue a conducting career, but when that did not develop as planned – he lost much money conducting Wagner in France – he was forced to take up the piano seriously again for economic reasons. As he put it, 'The pianist paid for the recklessness of the conductor.' He was much influenced by Chopin's own revolutionary style of teaching the piano, which he absorbed both from his own teachers at the Paris Conservatoire and later on from contact with former pupils of Chopin. For all these reasons he made an ideal teacher, not forgetting that he was also an incomparable pianist.

Rational principles

At the beginning of his book *The Rational Principles of Piano Technique*, Cortot suggests nine exercises to be done for 15

minutes every day before playing the piano. He likens these exercises to the warm-up exercises used by athletes or dancers, or the stretching and breathing exercises advised by doctors. The goal of the exercises was to loosen the playing apparatus of the pianist – fingers, wrist and forearm (and upper arm, though Cortot does not say this). For the aspiring pianist, the value of doing these warm-up exercises is that they loosen the playing mechanism, making it easier to learn technique directly through playing pieces.

Chopin's teaching was one source of these initial exercises. Karol Mikuli, one of Chopin's best pupils, reported: 'As gymnastic aids Chopin recommended bending the wrist inward and outward, repeated wrist strokes, and stretching the fingers, but all this with an earnest warning against over-fatigue.' Another inspiration for Cortot may have been Tobias Matthay's books on piano technique: *The First Principles of Pianoforte Playing* (1905) and *Relaxation Studies* (1908). Cortot refers to this obliquely in his study edition of Chopin's op 28 *Préludes*. Matthay, whose pupils included Harriet Cohen, Myra Hess and Moura Lympany, also recommended that his 'relaxation' exercises should be done every day before playing.

Thomas Manshardt, who studied with Cortot from 1957 to 1962, writes in his book *Aspects of Cortot* (a play on the title of Cortot's own book, *Aspects of Chopin*): 'The pianist must avoid playing the piano with unprepared muscles. No case of muscular impairment, damage, tendonitis, etc. has come to my attention in the case of any pianist who has correctly carried Cortot's principles... and who has scrupulously adhered to the following regime of preparing the muscles before playing. To play without proper muscular preparation can be harmful if not dangerous.'

Manshardt pointed out that by practising in this way, Cortot was able to play large programmes to an advanced age with no physical or technical problems. While on tour in his eighties, he played Chopin's 24 *Préludes* and 24 *Etudes* as a single concert. Magda Tagliaferro (a pupil of Cortot) toured the USA on more than one occasion to much acclaim when in her nineties – a testimony to his teaching!